

On the Banks of the Karakoro

By

Jeremiah Addison Miller

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Chairperson Joseph Harrington

Byron Caminero-Santangelo

Tom Lorenz

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Chairperson Joseph Harrington

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Abstract

On the Banks of the Karakoro offers readers intimate details of life in Mauritania, a little-known West African country saddled by the Sahara and underdevelopment. Heartbreaking, visceral, honest, and hopeful, the account of my experience as an English teacher with the Peace Corps is part memoir, part travel narrative, and part ethnography. Set in Kankossa, a town divided by the Karakoro, a seasonal river, I utilize every opportunity—my teaching experiences, fascinating characters, history, politics, and travel—to ingratiate the reader to the adust country and to explore, as I learn about them, the flashpoint issues of our time such as Islam, Al Qaeda, racism, colonialism, democracy, globalization, and development work. While so much of the world focuses its attention on Africa’s “problems” from distant offices, meeting rooms, and assembly halls, I illuminate the wildly rich dynamics of Mauritanian life from within mud walls, between trash-laden market streets, in vegetable gardens, and under Bedouin tents in a style that neither sensationalizes the experiences nor looks away from unpleasant realities.

On the Banks of the Karakoro

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Overview

Mauritania is a country that does not exist for most. Its borders are more familiar—Senegal, Mali, Algeria, Western Sahara, and the Atlantic. Even if one recognizes the name, specifics are difficult to recall except that it carves out a portion of the Sahara. For Mauritaniens, the country is largely a name, a consequence of colonial drawings on a map. Alliances are tribal rather than national. In the North, in the desert, Moors of Arab and Berber descent maintain loyalties to ancient hierarchies, and in the South, in the steppe, black Africans divide among Fulani, Wolof, and Soninke. Both groups herd their camels or cattle, sell their wares or their vegetables with minimal interference from Nouakchott, a capital born out of coastal dunes when Mauritania received its independence from France in 1960.

Yet it is a microcosm for the wrestling match between westernization and Islamic traditionalism. In a country where electricity and running water is scarce, cellular phones and satellite televisions powered by car batteries, have joined livestock and date palm groves as status symbols. Gas-powered refrigerators provide ice for the traditional zrig that breaks the Ramadan fast. *BBC Arabic* delivers the world news over battery-powered radios. And *Viagra* is the latest phenomenon where diarrhea kills more children than any other disease. While the Iraqi and Afghan wars highlight those countries as loci for this struggle, Mauritania is no less immediate. Repeated coups and failed elections have left an unstable government and expanses of unoccupied land have encouraged nefarious groups to seek refuge there. Most recently extremists have targeted foreign tourists causing the Dakar Rally, a European off-road race, to relocate and the Peace Corps to evacuate.

Mauritania is also a battleground for debates concerning international aid. Western powers largely sustain Mauritania through monetary and food donations, yet this parsimony has

created endless debt that gives these powers political leverage in the country. Against social will it is one of a few Muslim countries to recognize Israel. Similarly, political pressure has forced democracy onto a government that has only known tribal loyalties. Years of charity has also created an economy dependent upon aid. Where people once used traditional means to satisfy daily needs, they now import their wares. Prayer beads are plastic Chinese imports rather than carved wood or glass. Eggs and milk travel from Europe. Most rice comes from Asia or Mali. Fruit that Mauritians could produce also arrives in trucks from neighboring countries. While international aid does not carry all the blame, Mauritania's situation certainly adds to the debate concerning the value of western involvement in Africa.

While numerous books debate these issues ad nauseam, most eschew the people who actually live in these places. The strategy I take in *On the Banks of the Karakoro* is to approach these larger issues through the people who live them. Kankossa, where I lived and worked for two years, emulates Mauritania. The market divides the town, north and south, between Moors and black Africans, a divide reinforced by a genocidal civil war in 1989. International agricultural projects have focused on Kankossa because of its proximity to the seasonal river. Only five hours from the Malian border, it also has a small Pan-African population that imports new goods and ideas. Consequently by focusing on narratives involving close friends or acquaintances from Kankossa and my travels throughout the country, the reader enjoys vivid details about daily life that slip easily into the more recognizable, global issues. In essence, Mauritians—their cultures, ways of life, desires, and needs—create the place.

As a volunteer, I existed in the middle, between the West and Mauritania, as a well-meaning American volunteer trying to understand and assimilate into a drastically foreign culture. The process was much like a coming of age. At the beginning of my service I returned

to infancy. My ability to communicate and care for myself in the country resembled that of a two year old, but as my experience deepened so did my success. By the end of my service, I lived independent of many of the crutches that I relied on in the beginning so that I slowly became an ambiguous character who worked tirelessly to fit in as an American in Mauritania ultimately to fail. To be clear, though, I am a character as much as my friends and serve as the readers' eyes through which they can arrive at their own conclusions. Key to *On the Banks of the Karakoro* is the balance I maintain between my narrative presence and that of my friends.

Through each chapter, the narrative builds, developing the characters and the places, to form a complex portrait of a country that has largely gone unnoticed in English-language literature. Readers will latch on to my struggle to attain happiness through acceptance and success in a country so distant from my own. *On the Banks of the Karakoro* will be the definitive work both educational and entertaining about a country that challenges the imagination and grows in international importance every day.

Chapter 1 – Leaving Home

The trick of memory is that it changes. The trick of memory is that it doesn't change. The trick of memory is that it exists apart from people and place. The trick of memory is that it doesn't exist apart from people and place. The trick of memory is that people and place change. The trick of memory is that people and place don't change.

As I write about Mauritania, a country shaped by the Sahara's battle with the Atlantic, and my experiences living there as a Peace Corps volunteer teaching English in Kankossa, a town located south and central near the Malian border, the people and places I knew no longer exist. While my memories of Mauritania and the journals I keep still describe Mauritania and my experiences living there between June 2005 and July 2007, I know that the country began erasing those lines soon after I left.

On August 6, 2008, a military coup d'état led by General Mohammed Ould Abdel Aziz overthrew Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, the country's first democratically elected president since 1960, only a year and a half after he took office. Aziz stepped down in April 2009 only to win the presidency in the July elections.

Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) followed its execution of four French tourists in December 2007 on the Road of Hope outside of Aleg by exploding a bomb outside the Israeli Embassy in February 2008. The following year, it employed a suicide bomber near the French Embassy; it kidnapped three Spanish aid workers on the road from Nouakchott, the capital, to Nouadhibou, the deep-sea port; it killed an American worker in Nouakchott; it kidnapped and eventually killed a French citizen, Michel Germaneau, and kidnapped two Italian on the southeastern border town of Kobenni. The rapid succession of events and the new government's isolationist leaning prompted Peace Corps to evacuate its volunteers in 2009 and permanently

vacate the two floors that the national office occupied in Mauritania's tallest building, a ten-story office building and hotel, in 2010.

Since Peace Corps' evacuation, the violence has continued. A car bomb slammed into military barracks in Nema, the country's eastern-most city. In response, the government with the help of French and American intelligence sent convoys of weaponized Toyota Landcruisers across the Malian border to raze AQIM camps and towns providing them with supplies and support. February 2011, the military prevented two vehicles loaded with explosives from driving into the capital. Mauritania has become central to the United States' war on terror.

Economically, periods of drought through the last half of the twentieth century have chased the population that was once seventy-percent nomadic into shantytowns that squat on the sand around Mauritania's two largest cities, the capital, Nouakchott, and the deep-sea port, Nouadhibou. The population is now seventy-percent sedentary, scraping resources from land that is more likely to grow iron than corn. As a result, rising food and energy prices and water shortages have inspired protests across the country, including one in Kankossa during which a stray rubber bullet killed one of my former high school students. After Tunisian Mohammed Bouazizi self-immolated and set the rest of the Arab world ablaze in 2011, the push for similar efforts at change in Mauritania involved a failed, self-immolation outside the parliament building and a sit-in of a thousand students that the government dispersed with real bullets.

In Kankossa, electric poles that workers were placing in holes when I left now have lines drooping between them that illuminate street lamps in the market and along some dirt tracks and split into thinner lines that fire light bulbs, televisions, and a few personal computers that entertain the night. In the rainy season following my departure, the soggy mud-brick walls of my house and the house of volunteers for almost twenty-years before me, the Maison de Passage,

collapsed under the weight of doum-palm logs that supported the roof. Many of my teacher-friends have migrated to the cities. Maliam Diallo, an English-teaching colleague, quit teaching to translate for a mineral company in Nouakchott. Ahmedou ould Mohammedan, an Arabic teacher, transferred to a teaching position in the capital. My host-brother, Abdrhmane Traore married a girl from Selibaby, and she bore their first baby. He still teaches at a primary school in the countryside. My best friend, Moussa Barry, permanently locked the doors of his store, where I spent many afternoons at first in confusion at the banter and jokes of strangers in Arabic and French, and eventually in laughter with my friends, because of higher food prices and unpaid customer debts. In Nouakchott, he chased dead-end leads for translation jobs only to hope for a job mining gold or copper in the Akjoujt. While vegetable gardens and palm trees still line the Karakoro River that divides Kankossa and pinches at both ends to form a lake during the hot season, while dunes still corral the town on both sides of the River, and while the market in the center of the town still separates black Mauritians from white, a place that was once my surrogate home remains so only in memory, and it too evaporates each day I'm away like a mud puddle, dry and cracking.

Yet the trick of memory is that no matter how aware we are of its tricks, it still courses below our skin and the terrain of places we've lived. As I search journals and emails to remember the place and my friends in it, I struggle to remember myself. After Mauritania and the Peace Corps, I returned to Branson, Missouri, and Olive Garden, the restaurant that paid my bills before the Peace Corps, for eight months before entering graduate school. The idea was that I would reenter the happy life I lived before Mauritania. Yet conversations had moved on. Even though I'd kept up with many of my friends while in Mauritania, they always insisted that nothing was new or worth mentioning. In their minds, life had progressed so slowly that changes

were almost imperceptible. These changes, however, accumulated over two years to the point where the people I knew were sunspots floating in my vision. They resembled the people I knew, but those individuals soon vanished. The two-year period I spent in Mauritania was a permanent blank space in my relationship with friends and family. They could tell me about it, but I could never experience it, and that distinction seemed important.

Recognizing how much others had changed, I questioned how much I'd changed. I read through emails and journals to find the person I was before I left and he was hard to find. It's easy to track events in my life. When I look, I find someone who often felt placeless growing up, 'homeless'; someone who before he left for Mauritania was confident and happy because he achieved a sense of place, 'home'; someone who spent most of his first year in Mauritania scared and placeless again; someone who in his second year struggled and finally regained his confidence and his sense of place, 'home'. Yet this is only a skeleton of my life in Mauritania. The 'Why?' of the experience, the thoughts and emotions of daily life, are elusive.

I'm most successful in recovering them when the events were most stressful such as the first three months of training, my first days of teaching English, moments of betrayal and intense fear. As I read in my emails and journals about those days, they mushroom into Technicolor so that my thoughts and emotions are vivid and crisp, more than just words. Other times during my service, especially those that conformed to routine and habit like those that my Branson friends thought so unimportant, are gone. These are days when I was the happiest, when I felt appreciated, and when I felt at home. They offer no narrative because their story is in the 'being there'. They are the product of an established history between a place and the people who live there, an accumulation of the mundane that comes to define us.

Yet these layers, even though I know they exist, are impossible to separate. They seep into each other as rain water through soil. Perhaps bedrock layers exist that prevent seepage, but no experience or memory is impenetrable. Instead, details wander. Plants sprout where they shouldn't; words that one person said end up in someone else's mouth; events that occurred on one day are attributed to another; what I wanted to happen taints my memory of what actually happened. Similarly, reasons why people said and did things, even why I said and did things, were and are often mysterious to me.

I'm sometimes even reluctant to tell stories from Mauritania. When people insist, the most entertaining ones are often the most unflattering. Then, people tell me that Mauritania sounds awful, and I tell them that I eventually enjoyed it there, but when they ask why, I can't explain. I never have enough time and I feel like a failure. It's as if I can't describe a friend's good qualities; it's almost a betrayal. My quick answer has been that you'll endure a lot when you feel loved, which is true. But the fact remains that things were said and events occurred, and plants and trees grew out of them, which is why I write. It gives me time enough to excavate the complexities of what I can and cannot know.

* * * *

I told Moussa my last morning in Kankossa that I was leaving soon, and he asked, *When*, and I said that evening, and he asked, *How*, and I said that I was leaving by bush taxi, and he asked, *Why?* *A World-Vision car is leaving for Kiffa this afternoon*, and I said that I wanted to leave with Mauritania's permission. He was sitting in a chair welded piece-by-piece on the step up into his store figuring accounts with a capless ink pen as he did every morning. He glanced up from his numbers, his slim eyebrows bridged, and asked, *Permission? What do you mean?* Although he was my best friend, our relationship was based on what we could say in few

thousand words or less that we shared in English, French, and Hassaniya (the local Arabic dialect), sighs, and laughter. Moussa's English (much better than my French or Hassaniya) had progressed significantly in the two years that I lived as his neighbor because he was one of a few English-speakers in town, but figurative language is difficult for any non-native speaker and after all a place cannot actually give permission. I explained that I wanted to leave crammed in the cab of a pickup sharing sweat with the man or woman next to me and possibly the driver if I was unlucky enough to get the middle seat; I wanted the uncertainty of a truck abused by excessive loads, one hundred and twenty degree heat, and infrequent oil changes; I wanted to feel the shock and vibration of the axle beneath me as rocks, shrubs, and washboard sand tracks threatened the truck tires; I wanted my muscles and bones to experience the relief of unfolding from awkward bending. I wanted the sense of accomplishment I received from simply arriving. It would be the memory of how it had been for me the past two years—one missing from a comfortable NGO ride.

I couldn't actually explain all of this to Moussa. Instead, I told him that I wanted to say goodbye to a few more people, and since the taxi left later it would give me more time. *Yes*, he said. *This is good*. He curled a corner of his paper tablet, and his lips puckered as if he were holding a sewing needle between his lips, which was how he always looked when he felt the weight of some thing or another. I knew that he was generous with store credit, and worried that people took advantage of him, but we didn't talk about his financial situation. He lived in the same compound with his mother and his two brothers' families, which included three young girls. He also had brothers in the capital, Nouakchott, and Spain. His family did better than most, but money was still a worry. His eyes returned to his numbers. *I'll see you at lunch?* I asked. He did some addition, and replied, *No. I have to stay at my shop today*. He did this

occasionally. I never figured out why. I told him that I would stop by again before I left, and he said *See you then brother*.

I felt bad leaving Moussa. A new volunteer had been leaving him almost once a year for much of his life. At least one volunteer had occupied the house that I lived in, the Maison d'Passage, for many of the twenty or so years that Peace Corps volunteers had lived in Kankossa, and Moussa's family had always been their neighbors. Molly, the volunteer who lived in the house before me, was his favorite. She spoke excellent French, which allowed them to actually communicate. He sat with her on her porch in the evenings throughout much of her service and quickly fell in love with his neighbor who unlike most Mauritanian women knew about books and the world. He continued visiting her in the evenings even after he professed his love in a poem, and she confessed that she liked women. Homosexuality wasn't a possibility he had considered because it wasn't an option in Mauritania where it's punishable by death.

Still they remained friends after Molly moved to Nouakchott for a third year of service. Some afternoons I entered his store, and Moussa announced with lingering excitement that Molly had called. Then he told me her news. He even visited her once on one of his quarterly trips to the capital to restock his store. Molly told me later that she invited him to a dinner party where he had difficulty with her flush toilet, splattering the bathroom with urine. She said that it looked like he had tried to squat on the seat as if it were the French squat toilet he was used to because of the smudge of sandal prints on the seat. The next night, Moussa announced that he'd solved the problem by urinating in her shower. Molly admitted that this was better, not wanting to embarrass him further. She knew as I knew how generous Moussa had been with us because we'd been urinating on the toilet seat or in the shower almost daily since we arrived in Mauritania.

Then Molly finally left my second year for graduate school and slowly stopped calling. One day Moussa asked me why this always happened that volunteers stopped calling. *Even my best friends, they stop calling.* I really didn't know the answer, but felt ashamed for them even though I knew that life moved on. I mumbled to him that the distance was far and that life was busy in the United States. He nodded, but didn't reply. I worried that I was creating excuses for my future self. *I don't know,* I said. *Communication is difficult.* He clicked his tongue off the roof of his mouth in agreement and replied, *It's true, brother. It's true.*

* * * *

My last week in Kankossa was much like my last week in Branson, Missouri, filled with goodbyes from people who were unsure that they would see me again. Few people understood why I wanted to travel halfway across the world to live in country that few could identify on a map. Mentally, I always sort of shrugged at this question. It resembled other questions that interested adults had asked me about my college education and my English degree, which triggered anxiety that I had to justify the time and money spent at not-making money and prolonging childhood. The questions always suggested to me that life was something I was supposed to figure out, a quadratic equation composed of constants and variables that when plotted create a smile or a frown. For these interested adults, life was a matter of setting the constants early—employment, housing, and family—and then controlling the variables—economic woes, natural disasters, and health problems—through bank accounts, insurance policies, and religious doctrines. But I was never much good at the constants, nor was I too worried about whether the constants and variables offered a smile or a frown. After childhood cancer and losing my mother at the age of twelve, I knew that life wasn't permanently one or the other and that I didn't have much control over those things anyway. I understood the value and

desired the security of habits and familiarity—the need for a foundation of friends and family—but they didn’t hold my attention too long. Even though embracing life’s variables meant periods of flailing on a string above the unknown, I was drawn to the possibilities of creativity. Fear and anxiety, I decided, were signals to push forward rather than pull back.

But I didn’t know myself well enough at the time to explain this, so my answers to the interested adults were simplistic. I explained that I’d spent a year studying in Oxford, England. While British culture is similar to American culture, navigating life in a foreign city was challenging. Simply learning to ride the buses, buy a bicycle, and find public restrooms sparked an excitement for discovery that led me to explore the intricacies of the city such as its tortuous streets, vibrant pub culture, and rolling countryside.

The excitement brought by discovery encouraged me to explore the world through literature. My senior year of college, a postcolonial literature class opened me to the world where Europe had been. Novels immersed me in strange cultures in ways I never experienced in Europe. I had few references in which to ground an African village, yam plantations, or particleboard shanty towns. They disrupted the familiar, and my first desire was to try them although I never imagined how difficult that would be. Then when I found out about Peace Corps, I decided that I could help too. I had spent five years of my life focusing on my own development in college, so I thought that two years focusing on others’ development was reasonable. The desire to help people, I thought, was a motivation that required little explanation. Later, I realized that the desire to help people is a motivation that demands explanation.

Despite my experience with a literature objecting to western attempts to ‘help’ people in developing countries, I knew nothing about the Peace Corps and somehow disassociated it with

European colonialism. What I've learned since is that Peace Corps has been defending itself against these charges since its inception. It advertises its mission as providing technical expertise to underdeveloped countries and promoting understanding of Americans among citizens of the host country and understanding of the host country among Americans. Yet the Peace Corps has always suffered a crisis of image stemming from the idea that its mission is to help people. In fact a majority of the organization's employees and volunteers tack their bulletin boards with this mission, one that has inspired ire in many who know the organization best. In 2008, former volunteer, recruiter, and country director, Robert Strauss, published an article in *The New York Times* that suggested sending recent college graduates, which most volunteers are, to countries, which are often filled with their own college graduates, as experts in a field not necessarily their own is akin to sending "a fresh-out-of-college Cameroonian with a liberal arts degree who had occasionally visited Grandma's cassava plot . . . to Iowa to consult on pig-raising techniques learned in a three-month crash course." The article spread quickly throughout the Peace Corps community, and while the national office pled with former volunteers to defend the agency, much of the community was silent. Few returned volunteers, I think, would disagree with Strauss' assessment that local professionals know more about farming in the desert or teaching English to their country's children, yet what Strauss fails to consider, as some former volunteers who responded to the article pointed out, is that development is not the point.

In fact, offering technical expertise is only one of Peace Corps' three stated goals. According to John F. Kennedy's Peace Corps Act of 1961, any expertise American volunteers might offer is a tool for the greater cause of promoting "world peace and friendship." Although the Peace Corps emphasizes development, many volunteers realize this at some point during their service. They enter "the toughest job you'll ever love" with the idea of changing the

country for the better and leave happy to have made some host-country friends. Many who've had that experience will insist that cultural exchange was far more valuable and sustaining than any development project, Peace Corps-led or otherwise, that they initiated or witnessed whether or not they were successes or failures. The reasoning is that even if volunteer projects fail, the Peace Corps places Americans in locations where the cultures only experience each other from a distance, if at all, through cinema, television, magazines, and newspapers. If nothing else, both cultures receive a hint that the individuals they often perceive in mass all secretly laugh at dirty jokes, watch trashy television, and worry about feeding our children.

If Peace Corps' only goal were promoting "world peace and friendship," as Kennedy suggested, the agency would have less trouble with its image. Instead, Kennedy's intentions were more neocolonial than altruistic. When the agency finally received life, it did so within the Mutual Security Act, which promoted America's Cold War interests. Specifically, Kennedy wanted "to demonstrate to Mr. Khrushchev and others that a new generation of Americans has taken over this country, young Americans [who will] serve the cause of freedom as Communists work for their system."¹ Neocolonialist charges followed it throughout its early years. Kwame Nkrumah, president of Ghana, was the first African leader to accept volunteers. Members of the administration saw this as a foreign policy coup since Nkrumah was a stalwart Communist, winner of the Lenin Peace Prize in 1963, and suspicious of the United States' policies toward Africa. Soon after Peace Corps volunteers landed in Ghana, Nkrumah turned on them, publicly declaring that the Peace Corps was an arm of the CIA. The University of Ibadan College Student Union in Nigeria followed in 1961, accusing volunteers of spying and demanding that the country expel them. Whatever US government's intentions, volunteers managed to maintain the

¹ Amin, Julius A. "The Perils of Missionary Diplomacy: The United States Peace Corps Volunteers in the Republic of Ghana." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 23. Spring, 1999. Web. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_go2877/is_1_23/ai_n28731005/?tag=content:coll

integrity of the agency. Nkrumah never expelled them and admitted privately that “the Peace Corps was one of America’s best programs for Africa.”² In Nigeria, volunteers started a hunger strike to convince the Student Union to dialogue with them. And this is, perhaps, the most significant point that Strauss’ article fails to consider—the human capacity on both sides to adapt to unfavorable conditions and create unexpected successes.

* * * *

My last week in Kankossa was a tour of my successes. After leaving Moussa’s, I met Ginger, one of two other volunteers in Kankossa who arrived at the start of my second year. She had volunteered to accompany me as I wound in and out of market alleys to say goodbye to friends who had welcomed me into their lives fully aware that I would disappear from their lives two years later. Anything that I would bring to their lives would live in memory and maybe an occasional phone call. I knew that I was a risk, and I was humbled that they deemed me worth it.

I had planned the goodbyes in phases. I’d visited the school on my day off to photograph my students. I’d eaten lunch at teachers’ compounds before they left for the holiday. I drank tea with Ali Messoud’s and Amadou Barry’s families, who hosted Annika, my teaching predecessor, and past volunteers, that had supported me early when I was searching for understanding faces, but lived across town from me, too far to visit more than a few times a month once my life became busy. I traveled seven kilometers south to the village of Agmamine where Caleb, the volunteer who arrived a year before I did, became a surrogate father for Ahmed Taleb and Mini who lived with their grandmother, Magou, who was Caleb’s host mother. Agmamine, much like my surrogate family in the Ozarks, was where I went when my world grew too big, and I felt alone. It was where I never failed to feel loved. Ginger, Donna, the other Kankossa volunteer, and I filled our stomachs to discomfort from a sheep Kouthella Traore, a truck mechanic, had

² *Perils of Missionary Diplomacy*

killed in my honor. Drinking expensive Coke after Coke that he pushed towards me, his generosity embarrassed me.

Our friendship developed one steamy afternoon early in my service because he invited me to sit next to him on a bench under the trees shading his mechanic garage. Then one day he gave me a ride back to my house in a truck he was test driving and confessed that a baby in his family had passed away the night before. He asked me questions that I couldn't answer such as why God takes babies that He'd just put into the world and why bad things happen to good people. I once tried to teach him English by candlelight on a chalkboard in my house. He speaks French, Hassaniya, and three or four other languages, but after an hour with the alphabet, we both decided that we were too tired at night. Another time, I planted prickly-pear cactus to mend holes along his garden fence because my principled conscience refused to use Peace Corps money to benefit a single family. The cactus drowned the next rain season when the lake rose. All I gave Kouthella and his family after two years of service was broken conversation three or four times a week, which his other visitors already provided him. I never imagined that I would learn so much about friendship when I left for Mauritania.

When Ginger accompanied me my last day in Kankossa, I had been saying goodbye for two weeks. Occasionally, I had to say goodbye more than once. Friends surprised me along the road to the market or as I walked home, and I had to say goodbye again. Even though I had explained to friends that I had to spread out my goodbyes because I couldn't possibly do them in one day, I still felt guilty and worried that I offended friends who weren't last on my list when in reality my list reflected those whom I saw every day and would see up to my last day. Consequently, I hid by taking the least trafficked of the three routes between my house and the market, the one covered by a canopy of tree branches that followed the fenced vegetable gardens,

lining the river and passed by Kouthella's house. I said goodbye so often that tears could fill my eyes and clear dust from my cheeks at any moment during the day. Usually it occurred when I was alone walking on the road or packing in my house. When it did happen in public, I was usually sweating so much that I doubt anyone noticed. But mostly I tried to bundle my emotions and pack them in my bags just as any other possession that I kept for memories because Mauritians rarely cried. Life is difficult for everyone, they reasoned, so showing it is for children who haven't learned that yet. Appearing weak was my greatest fear during my service. I didn't want to appear weak.

So Ginger kept me from crying my last day in Kankossa. We visited all of my friends who worked in the market because they were the people I couldn't avoid. I visited Brahime, Caleb's best friend from Agmamine who always arranged transport for me to Agmamine. I visited Mohammed Lemine, who actually lived across the river in Kankossa II where he was a full-time gardener, but also worked as a tailor in the market. I'd spent nights with him traveling around the countryside teaching women's cooperatives in villages how to make CerAmine, a more nutritional flour made from peanuts, beans, millet, and corn. I visited Moustapha, the white Moor shopkeeper who patiently made tea for me, a thirty-minute process, early in my service when our conversations lasted five minutes and we spent the next twenty-five, thinking of words that we could say to each other. Eventually when we could communicate, he taught me about life in Mauritania before and during colonialism. I visited the women in Moussa's family who sold mid-morning snacks and had always encouraged me when I didn't know how to negotiate the rules of men's and women's interactions in a Muslim country. For the past few weeks, I'd been sleeping in their compound because my house had been burglarized.

Finally I visited Yuba, a barber and cassette-tape copier, whom I'd recently met, but was a friend of friends. My six foot frame shrunk next to his, but he laughed religiously through a gap between his front two large enough to inset a third tooth. He served as a break from my market routine when my other friends and I ran out of things to talk about. After I visited him a few times, he started sitting next to me on the bench in his shop when he didn't have customers, and put his hand on my knee while we discussed local news. Physical contact is a sign of friendship among Mauritanian men, so initially, I felt accepted. Then, one day, I had to stop visiting him when his hand moved up my thigh, massaging toward my groin until I couldn't breathe. I crossed my legs in different ways. I stood up occasionally to stretch. I contemplated leaving, but he was making tea, and Mauritanian custom insisted that it was offensive to leave once the ritual had started. Others were in the store with us, so I tried to relax and reason that my discomfort was a cultural difference. Thankfully, on this visit, new customers required him to work behind his counter, but the next time everyone left the shop soon after I arrived, and we were alone. Wisely I had declined tea, so that when his hand resumed its creeping and squeezing and my defense strategies failed, I left before my anxiety manifested in ways that I couldn't control. I only returned with Ginger to say goodbye, and I was thankful that I did because I learned that he too was leaving Kankossa that evening on the same truck. How awkward it would have been meeting him on the truck having neglected to say goodbye.

* * * *

After returning from Mauritania, I wondered whether I would have accepted the invitation to serve there if I knew more about the country or the job. When I first received it, and people asked about Mauritania or the Peace Corps, I was embarrassed by my silence because I knew that I was one of these volunteers Strauss bemoans who had no experience in what the

Peace Corps was sending me to do—teach English. In fact, I did little research on Mauritania either. I explained to myself that I was busy and the invitation came at such short notice, but I suspect that I feared what I would learn. Instead, I placed faith in my confidence that I would figure it out when I got there. When I met other volunteers and figured out they had done their research, I thought that I was irresponsible. But later I forgave myself because no amount of research could have prepared me for the experience. My imagination just wasn't capable of realistically imagining *any* possible scenario I might encounter.

Eventually, when people asked these questions, I answered them by locating Mauritania geographically because it was the only question I could answer with certainty. When I explained that it was across the Atlantic, north of Senegal and south of Morocco, I received perplexed stares until I added that Morocco was south of Spain and that I too had never heard of Mauritania until Peace Corps informed me that I would live there. When I mentioned that the Sahara covered about two-thirds of the country and that the population was ninety-nine percent Muslim, many thought that I was simply naive. My grandmother warned me one day while we worked in her garden that *I should watch out for those Arabs because they will rob you blind!* I smiled at her well-intended advice and qualified that Mauritians weren't exactly Arabs. Then I asked her, *Grandmother, how many Arabs have you known in your life anyway?* She grinned immediately, *Well, maybe three . . .*

Others misunderstood Peace Corps' mission entirely. I visited my father's and step-mother's church the last Sunday before I left because they said that there were people who wanted to see me before I left because I had grown up there even though I stopped attending church in college three years earlier and that particular church almost ten. But the visit went well, I only needed to explain to a few people that the Peace Corps wasn't a Christian missionary

organization and that I wouldn't be saving any Muslims, until the pastor decided, in the middle of his sermon, that my example fit his message and asked me to stand so that he could recognize *this brave young man damning himself to a Muslim country to do God's work*. Later, my father pled with me to believe him that he had nothing to do with it. He had supported my decision more than most, and I was happy that he knew me well enough to know that the display would irritate me since we weren't the talking type and had trouble communicating for much of our lives especially after my mother died when I was eleven.

Other friends who knew me better, or only knew me as a young adult, trusted that I knew what I was doing. After graduating from college, I wandered back to Branson, a summer tourist mecca filled with outlet malls and once country-music stars, to work in the dead months of winter when most people draw unemployment. I had applied to the Peace Corps, but it appeared unlikely because I needed some medical tests to assure them that childhood cancer wouldn't reappear; tests for which they refused to pay and for which I had no money. My parents quickly escorted me to a one-bedroom apartment where I worked sparingly at a job that I had the summer before and stared at gray skies through my sliding-glass door while subtracting numbers from my bank account. In the spring, I found a job waiting tables that would pay my bills and provide me with friends to assuage the loneliness of returning a stranger after five years of college to the place from which I came. Eventually, I remembered a doctor-friend who mentioned that the hospital had a program for those unable to pay to which I applied and was accepted at one hundred percent benefit since I was poor. By the time Peace Corps assigned me to Mauritania a year later, I had attached myself to the Ozarks and made friends that I didn't want to leave.

In the last week before I left, several of my coworkers and I camped and canoed along the James River that cuts through shallow hills and cow pastures from Springfield into Table Rock Lake, an impoundment which electrified the previously candle-lit area in 1958. The last night of our drinking in the light and shadows of the campfire, my best friend, Shane, who had organized the trip, presented to me for everyone to see, a Mauritanian survival kit. Shane and I had spent much of the fall and spring exploring the Ozarks' trails, waterways, and history, and his enthusiasm for the place convinced me that despite my estrangement from it during college, it was braided into my identity more than any other. Only then did I start feeling like the place was a home. (Find the items in the kit to show how they knew me in contrast with my family. Something about feeling sad to leave just when it started to feel like home). His cousin insisted on reading my palm, and then refused to tell me what it said. Finally, Shane said, *It's silly that I don't know this, but what exactly will you be doing there?*

What I knew of *what I would be doing* in the Peace Corps was contained in a large white envelope with a red, blue, and white emblem of an American flag whose stars were morphing into doves. I remember returning from work to find it where my brother had left it on the round dining-room table between our kitchen and living room. The envelope was heavy enough that it bounced when I tossed it on the couch. I turned on music for the human voices because I was afraid to be in the room with it—not the envelope as much as my future. I considered leaving it for the next day, but I knew its contents wouldn't change. I struggled against the envelope glue, but once I broke the seal its glossy contents slid easily into my lap. I remember a letter welcoming me to “the toughest job you'll ever love.” *Mauritania?* I thought. I remember my confidence leaking from my chest into my stomach. I thought that I was familiar with the names

written between lines of the Earth's green, brown, and blue spaces. Other materials, pamphlets and a booklet, were included in the envelope, but I've since forgotten what they told me.

* * * *

As I write about the experience, I've searched online for any remnants of the envelope material and found a Peace Corps Mauritania welcome book published in March 2009, only months before Peace Corps would evacuate its volunteers. It is much more extensive than what I remember—over a hundred pages. The cover presents black and white photo of three elementary-school girls sitting at a school desk. Two black girls crowd a white girl. Their mulafas—a tissue-cloth wrap—contrast with their skin color and frame their faces. The picture intends to show Mauritania's diversity, but my attention moves from the bored black girls to the center where the white girl's eyes leap from the cover and her teeth shine through her smile as if she represents the unrealized potential buried by the hostile Sahara that volunteers should recover.

Inside bolded sections divide the overwhelming information into manageable chunks. The Peace Corps started in Mauritania in 1967, sending volunteers to build roads and dams, improve health programs, and teach English, math, and physics. The current program's infrastructure dates from the 1990s. By the time I served in 2005-2007, over eighty volunteers worked sectors that had supposedly changed according to the interests of the Mauritanian government. Foreign governments such as China and Spain had taken over the road building, students had apparently learned math and physics, and the Guinea worm had been eradicated, so Peace Corps left those projects. It still recruited volunteers for the mainstays: community health, education, and agroforestry, but the Mauritanian government had decided other areas were important as well. In response, Peace Corps added environmental education, small

enterprise development, information and communication technologies, and girls' education and empowerment.

To satisfy goal-oriented, new volunteers, the book describes each sector in vague development-work jargon and enough detail to assuage the fear that Peace Corps would dump them in *Timbuktu*. We didn't know yet that Timbuktu and Mauritania were essentially the same. Education volunteers, I read, "teach English to Mauritanian students in middle and high schools. . . . They also work to improve the quality of education in Mauritania by working with host-country national teachers, designing teaching materials, and setting up lesson plan banks." Teaching is what teachers do, which comforted me. My job was tangible. After seventeen years of education, I felt like I knew what teachers did. I only had to recall those I thought most effective. But those were my rationalizations; Peace Corps provided me no such assurances.

Instead it offered more responsibilities. Education volunteers *also* participate in "outreach activities, cross-sector collaboration, and individual Volunteer initiatives." As I read them now, the phrases ring familiar not because I heard them during my service but because of their stock quality that reminds me of other missionary sectors of society such as evangelical Christian groups, non-profit businesses, and social service agencies. They're code words for progress, for altering beliefs or methods or behavior to look a more like our own. Otherwise they don't really mean anything except that you'll have to figure it out for yourself. The book fails to mention that.

For as much as it massaged its audience's aspirations for development work, the rest of the book is a cautionary tale. A French colony until 1958, it describes Mauritania as just a little down on its luck, one of the poorest in the world, trapped by the Sahara and still feeling its way out of more than sixty years of French colonization but striving toward Democracy. Three ethnic

groups and tense race relations populate the country: white Moors, black Moors (formerly slaves to the Moors), and black Africans (divided into language groups: Pulaar, Wolof, Sonike, and Bamana). Iron exports, fishing, and a recently discovered coastal oil field sustain Mauritania's economy that is still a net importer of food. "Sandstorms," it says, "can strike anywhere at any time and last from a few hours to several days." Housing involves one-room huts with or without electricity or running water—"There are no guarantees." Communication, too, is difficult in the country. Cell phone and internet coverage is scarce. Mail arrives infrequently. The book warns that volunteers are often troubled by unwanted attention, and the "Rewards and Frustrations" section is dominated by frustrations.

Even the packing list comes with warnings (most of the words are from the welcome book, but I add to and rearranged them): *Shorts are not worn by men or women in public. Do not bring a sports coat or anything that needs dry cleaning. Bring one extremely adjustable belt (male volunteers typically lose weight). Test run the skirt: See if you can sit comfortably crosslegged on the floor while wearing it. Pack sports bras (for running and bumpy car rides), scarves (to keep your hair out of the dust). Every time you enter a room, you must take off your shoes. Avoid sneakers with air bubble support systems; they will be punctured easily on the terrain. Big plastic bags are useful for keeping out dust and sand. Note: zippers can break quickly because of sand. Expect to drink 4-8 liters of water each day. Include cheap toys for kids (but giving too many gifts may cause problems). Photos of family and friends (check for cultural appropriateness: avoid bathing suits, alcohol, etc). Two pairs of sunglasses you can afford to lose. USB flash drive/memory stick for storing electronic documents (CDs and floppy disks are not a practical means of data storage in Mauritanian conditions).*

That I did little research on the country before arriving was probably wise because I brought few expectations. I knew that Mauritania was in the Sahara and poor, but I was more confident than I should have been that I could survive. I prepared for the worst by imagining living in a tent alone atop a dune in the middle of the desert and refusing to turn on my air conditioning in June before I left. This naivety sustained me until our plane descended toward the Nouakchott airport, and I saw, through the sandy haze, walls inclosing compounds without houses, dirt tracks, abandoned construction equipment, white tents, and donkeys pulling carts. If this was the capital of the country, I thought, what does the rest of the country look like? My confidence disappeared. I looked to other volunteers' faces to confirm my fear. One guy who'd grown up in Peru murmured that he'd never seen so little development. I felt the temperature of the window to feel the Sahara even though I knew it was double-paned. The drag flaps rose. Spindrift sand thickened. The plane tilted, and the tarmac appeared. Landing gear cranked from below, and my heart drummed in my chest. I imagined that every day would be like this one and every place in the country was like this one or worse. The tires skipped on the tarmac, and I wondered if I had overestimated myself. I shut the window shade.

Later, I learned that the desolate place we flew over was the construction site for a new condominium development, but I had yet to learn to distrust my first impressions.

* * * *

Where's he going? I asked Yuba as our driver plodded down the dune. We were squatting with other passengers on the incline of a dune next to the truck that was taking us to Kiffa. *He's going to get a bigger piece of wood to push under the tire*, he replied. Thirty minutes earlier, we were charging up one of the two stretches of dunes between Kankossa and Kiffa in the four-wheel-drive Toyota Landcruiser pickup when the driver veered off the

established track to find a harder surface. The plan put us on course toward the only two trees in sight, which he narrowly avoided by turning sharply into a patch of looser, deeper sand. Once we were stuck, he floored the accelerator and entrenched us more. His next idea involved backing the truck out of the hole onto harder sand. The driver gunned the engine, this time in reverse, and the truck shot backwards into a couple of sturdy shrubs above the two trees that he avoided earlier. The shrubs lifted the back end just off the ground and tangled in the undercarriage. Passengers and the driver searched the dune for branches to place under the rear tires for traction. When the pile reached the tire, the driver got back in the truck and cranked the engine. It refused to start, which was when he charged off down the dune.

But, aren't the pieces there good enough? And shouldn't he get the truck to start before he worries about getting it unstuck? I asked Yuba. He shrugged. As I watched, a white Moor man touched my knee. *Are you Christian?* he asked. After a hundred such conversations, I knew what he was planning. I tried to ignore him, staring into the empty countryside where our driver had disappeared. He asked again, and finally I answered with the only acceptable answer in Mauritania that yes, I was a Christian although this wasn't exactly true. He continued by suggesting that Islam and Christianity were very similar, and I knew that he would then inform me that Islam was just a more recent manifestation of God's word. The Qu'ran was the only book that he read, and it taught him everything he needed to live in the world. He would tell me that Islam offered me the peace that no other religion could and that Muslims were the happiest people in the world. He would have told me all of this if Yuba didn't remind him that religion was a personal choice and that Christians had a place in the afterlife just as Muslims.

Yuba and I continued chatting and glancing down the dune as the man tried to listen in. Eventually, he interrupted us again and asked me if I was from England. When I answered that I

was from the United States, he began telling me everything he knew about the United States at which point I realized that he was showing off for the other passengers squatting on the dune just above him. As he rambled, the sun crept farther below the horizon, and I drifted into self-loathing about my choice of transportation.

It had all started off well. After lunch and more goodbyes, Ginger walked with me to the taxi garage where we sat under a small pavilion-like structure called a limbar, which shaded us from enervating sun. Other male passengers lounged or slept in their dara'as, using their excess cloth to shield themselves from the furnace glow and the swarming flies. A few women crouched next to pots of food they were trying to sell. In front of us, two white moor women were discussing the recent democratic elections with fear. One woman leaned towards the other and commented, *I don't like this democracy. If the blacks can vote, they could win. Then, they will be able to do anything they like. One could come and sit down next to us right now, and we could do nothing about it!* I smiled and asked Ginger if she heard. The woman was right. If the black population, the black Africans and the black Moors, actually merged politically, former slaves would rule their masters, and she would see far more changes than those involving social mores. Even if the democratic elections were less than democratic, I thought that the new political discourse that included the black population and concern for women's rights was transforming the country. I suspected that Mauritania, a country whose culture changed very little for much of history, would mirror the comments that two sisters, who were both my neighbors and students, said to me when I said goodbye to them: *You won't recognize us when you come back because we'll be married and fat!*

When I realized the drone from travel companion had stopped, our driver was simultaneously trudging up and sliding down the dune with a flashlight and an ax. I laughed at his choice of force, and then worried once I realized what he was attempting. *Where'd he get those?* I asked Yuba. I hadn't seen a village anywhere close by. He shrugged: *Maybe there are some people camping below the dune.* The driver kneeled at the rear of the truck. He was going to cut down the shrub so that we could push the truck over it. This would send the truck rolling down the dune, which would give the driver enough speed for the transmission to start it. I glanced at Yuba and said, *He's crazy.* His plan offered so many opportunities for disaster. Most likely, I thought, was that he would miss the shrub with the ax and puncture the tire. If he managed to avoid that, he would only have seconds to swerve sharply to avoid the trees just below the truck. If he missed the trees, he would need to regain control of the truck as it hurtled down the steep dune through thick sand that could flip a fast moving vehicle if it caught the tires. The best result, I thought, would be that we spent the night on the dune, waiting for another truck. The worst, I thought, would be that we needed to rescue the driver from the cab of the crumpled, burning truck before it exploded.

The driver started clearing the sand from below the shrub. Just as he finished, someone decided that it was time for evening prayer. Everyone walked to the other side of the truck. I considered joining them, but decided to stay in case the driver needed help. He started swinging on his knees. *Thwap, thwap, thwap.* I watched with a smiling nihilism. *Thwap, thwap, thwap.* The wood was softer than I thought. By the time the others finished praying, he had cut through the main trunk. A few of the men helped him up pull up the other roots. He disappeared behind the other side of the truck and finished clearing the other shrub.

I joined all of the men at the front of the truck. At the driver's cue, we rocked the truck over the stumps and continued pushing until the front end cleared them. The truck quickly outran us, and I gasped as the driver jerked the wheel. The bed just missed one of the tree trunks as the cab and drivers-side mirror scraped through thorny branches. Moments later the driver disengaged the clutch and the engine jerked to life. The transmission slowed the truck's momentum so that it quietly stopped at the bottom of the dune. Passengers around me cheered. Yuba slapped my shoulder. I just shook my head. *This is ridiculous*, I said. The driver sped to the top of the dune, this time following the track. The rest of us walked to the truck where we squeezed into the cab and onto the bed, and two hours later we arrived in Kiffa without any trouble. As I walked to the Peace Corps regional house where I would stay, I kicked pebbles and smiled at how it always seemed to happen like this in Mauritania, another place that I had begun to understand and feel at home just as I was leaving: bad gets worse only to the point where it avoids catastrophe.

Chapter 2 – Shaking Hands

Four of us, Alayna, Beth, Darren, and I, arrived in Tinzah, a suburb of Kaedi and located on the other side of the little-used airplane runway. After spending one night in air-conditioned hotel rooms in Nouakchott, Peace Corps transported us trainees to the training facility, the high school in Kaedi, Mauritania's largest southern city and hemmed in a bend of the Senegal River, where we wilted in the unairconditioned classrooms and camped in our mosquito nets in the schoolyard. None of us slept much because swirling gusts covered us in sand, and the foam matelas we slept on absorbed our bodies' sweat and collected the sand. Only a few days later, they divided us into language groups and shuttled us with our language facilitators to our homestays.

The SUV stopped at a door in a cinderblock wall near the runway at the edge of Tinzah. The wall made a corner where the sand track intersected with a gravel one and grew into a one room store. I stared down at my sandaled feet in the floor of the Toyota Landcruiser and the inevitable choice I would have to make to move them and exit the vehicle. The choice wasn't inevitable, I guess, but I convinced myself that it was and that's usually how I overcome fear.

Rajal, our language facilitator, hurried us and our luggage inside the corrugated-metal door that shrilled on its hinges. *Your families will be here soon*, he said. His soft voice disappeared in the dry air as soon as it left his sunken cheeks. The yard inside the walls was tawny sand. In front of us, another building formed the back wall. It was shaped like a cinder block and built from cinder blocks. Its walls were smoothed with cement daubing and painted the color of scrambled eggs. Two sky-blue doors opened to two separate rooms.

He unlocked his door and welcomed us into his room. *This is where I'll be living and where we'll have classes*. We slipped off our sandals and sat against a wall on thin, sanguine

carpet. A small desk and chair huddled in the corner. Papers and a book about Greek philosophy spread across the desk. He saw us glancing at them and said, *Teachers always have work*. I asked about the book. *In Oudane*, he said, *I teach philosophy. I'm just preparing my notes*. I mentioned that I had a degree in philosophy and felt reassured that we had something in common.

He pulled off his worn, light-blue dara'a, a flowing cloak that swept the tops of his feet, and hung it on a nail. It sagged as if the shell of a ghost. That's when I noticed how small he was. His shoulders and chest made bony impressions in his white tee-shirt. He rummaged through a small suitcase and removed another dara'a. This one was toothy white and had golden embroidery that seemed to melt down the collar, which opened all the way to his chest. Sunlight revealed intricate patterns in the weave.

Alayna and Beth who were sitting on the floor reached to feel the cloth. *This is only my second nicest dara'a*, he said quietly. Later I learned that he just never raised his voice. *The other is in Oudane, in the far north, where I live. I only wear it for special occasions*. He guided the dara'a over his head. I asked, *Do you have a family in Oudane? Is that an appropriate question?* We'd learned at the Center that it's rude to ask Mauritians how many children they have because it's considered presumptuous or boastful to count them and one's luck might change. He smiled; some of his teeth were running away; some already had escaped. *No problem. Some people are superstitious; I am not. Anyway people know that you don't mean to offend*. And as if to prove he wasn't superstitious, he continued, *I have a wife and a baby boy. Yes, they're in Oudane*. He bunched the excess fabric over his shoulders, and added, *You know, I'm a stranger here too*. Before I left Mauritania, however, the education ministry had reassigned him to Kaedi. He hated the move, but he was no longer a stranger there.

A knock sounded from the door in the wall. *They're here.* He stepped down into the sand. I started chewing the top of my thumb. Rajal opened the door to a procession of women and children. The women entered Rajal's room; the children clogged the doorway. They greeted us: *As-salaam ala-kum.* We fumbled for our practiced responses—*W'ala-kum as-salaam*—but they didn't seem to notice. The women were a sunburst of colors. Their mulafas, tie-dyed or wax-printed cloth tissue, wrapped their bodies as if maypoles, leaving only their faces, which were different colors of dusk, uncovered. Their skin tones focused the colors of their clothes and lent power to the whites of their guarded eyes. I smiled, hoping to lessen the tension and my nerves, but no one responded. My chest tightened, wondering if I'd done something wrong.

In the small room, we stood across from each other as if we were picking teams. I worried how I should act. Peace Corps had briefed us on personal interactions and given us a *Cross-Cultural Manual* to read. At the training center, I dosed with the book after lunch and before falling asleep at night. The *Manual* listed rule after rule for various social encounters, and in the feverish heat, I struggled to memorize them: *Saying hello to a Mauritanian can be a lot more complicated and important than you would think; In general, the Moors are very conservative and will not shake the hand of members of the opposite sex unless they are related; Pulaar, Soninke, and Wolof groups tend to be more liberal about this and will often shake the hands of opposite-sex persons; If you are confused whether or not to shake the hand of a member of the opposite sex simply wait for them to extend their hand to you; Instead, nod your head, give a little wave, or touch your heart; Remember not to hold eye contact for a long time; Realize these are generalizations.*¹

¹ *Cross-Culture Manual*. Peace Corps: Islamic Republic of Mauritania, PST 2005. 21-22.

I worried about making a good impression. As a child, I was shy, and usually restrained my personality until I trusted the stranger not to judge me. Through high school and college, I relaxed some as I gained confidence, and finally, as a restaurant server, I lost all fear of meeting new people. But those experiences somehow didn't translate. As a server, my relationship with my customers usually lasted thirty minutes or an hour, and then I never saw them again. I didn't care how they judged me. This relationship would last for three months; these people were supposed to become family. Sleep-deprived and overheated, I failed to consider that this first impression was only one among three months of impressions; I would have plenty of time for good ones.

I bit my tongue so my teeth wouldn't chatter and stared across at the line of women. I measured the rules I could remember against the situation: *Are these women black Moors or one of the other black African groups? All the women at the training center shook my hand, are these women like them? These women are our host-mothers, should I consider myself family? If so, would I insult her if I didn't shake her hand? How long's too long to make eye contact? Which side's my heart on, right or left?* My mind ran unbridled. I followed questions with more questions without pausing for answers.

Rajal stood in the space between us with a paper that connected trainees to families. He read Alayna's name and Beth's name and their host-mothers'. The Mauritanian women's eyes warmed as they stepped across the space to shake hands and hug. Then they assigned them Mauritanian names and guided the women to their sides.

Jeremy, Rajal said, you are next. Childhood anxieties returned as physical memories. The taste of keys on my parents' key chains. Tinnitus in my right ear from smashing a roll of

bottle caps between two rocks at a friend's house. The nausea of the waiting room before a cancer check-up. I heard him read the name of my host-mother: *Fatimetou*.

The woman in front of me nodded. Her face was younger and prettier than the others. When I visited during training a year later, she was no longer as young or as pretty. I smiled weakly. Her eyes were almost level with mine and more animated than her face. This comforted me because I trust eyes more than words or faces. They don't hide as much. Then I realized she could probably read the fear in mine.

I stood frozen by indecision. *What do I do with my hands? Which side is my heart on? What if I pick the wrong one?* Out of habit my hand sprang from my side for a hearty handshake. I cringed. Everyone stared at my hand, hanging in the space between us. My skin was splotted from the heat. Moisture formed on my palm. I felt as if I'd said something that I couldn't take back. Sweat collected on my upper lip and I smelled the warmth of my anxiety. Fatimetou grinned as my eyes fell to the carpet. Her right palm rose slowly, passing my hand, and touched her heart.

Rajal rescued me. He asked her my Mauritanian name. *Dudu*, she replied. *Like my son*. A boy with welcoming eyes raised his hand. I could feel my ears flair. *Du-du?* I thought. His cuteness lessened the embarrassment, but I still wanted to hide. I tried to place the name in its Mauritanian context and remember the confident with which Fatimetou said it; I tried to recall the *Cross-Culture Manual's* calming voice: *Giving you a name is their way of welcoming you into the family*. A good name was important. It wasn't as much a superstition as a realization that life was difficult, and children should start with the best chance to succeed. Most names were Quranic, but others translated to superlatives. *Rajal*, for example, meant *the man*. Others meant *the most beautiful*, *the peaceful*, *the one who's always loved*, *the center of the earth*, *God's*

servant. But my mind wandered to my childhood and the laughs that *Dudu*, no matter its meaning (which I never learned), would have brought from children on the playground. Then I imagined the laughs it would bring other volunteers. Dudu was still smiling, and I couldn't deny that. For the first three months, my name was *Shit*.

Even though I changed my name later, shit was integral to my Peace Corps service. It represented the first step in readjusting expectations. For me, as for most volunteers, I think, this happened the first or second day of training when I had to shit. At the Kaedi high school, there were a row of latrines each with a faucet, each with a makarash, or what volunteers called a *butt pot*, on the step, and each hopefully with a hunk of peanut soap somewhere close by. The necessity part came after I had finished and I was squatting, or rather wobbling, in the semi-dark above a hole in the ground with no toilet paper in sight. The choices I had were to use my left hand and the *butt pot* or pull up my pants and leave. At that point, it became necessary for me to readjust my expectations and use my left hand and the *butt pot*. Throughout our first few days at the school, conversation often veered to that question: *Have you done it yet?* By the time we left for our homestays, the answer was almost unanimously, *Yes*. There were a few holdouts who'd packed toilet paper, or found some in the infirmary, but they were the minority. By the time we left for our homestays, wiping your ass with your left hand was normal.

Shit continued to readjust our expectations throughout training and our Peace Corps experiences. Soon after we arrived in Tinzah, shit became a topic of conversation because none of us could do it. Mauritanian food is generally oily, carbohydrate heavy, and fiber lite. So after a week, the question was once again: *Have you done it yet?* When we returned to the school after two weeks, the Training Center tried to feed us well and covered the carbohydrates with

lots of vegetables and spices. This diet had the opposite effect to the point where a solid shit was news.

Another problem was that the makaresh (the *butt pot*), functioned as our family's principle water-pouring apparatus. Family's use it for such things as washing hands before meals, filling the tea pot, or rinsing away other liquid spills such as tea, baby urine, or chicken shit, so at homestays, it wasn't always filled and ready to go when your intestines cramped and lurched. In fact, when you needed it most, you often had to find it and fill it before running to the latrine. So the question at the Center became: *Have you shit yourself yet?* By the time we finished training, shitting yourself on occasion was normal too.

Once we reached our permanent sites, the water we drank wasn't always filtered and the food we ate wasn't always the most sanitary. Flies alighted on various types of animal shit around town or in the pits of latrines and transferred it to our food and water, which ended up in our stomachs. In the course of our service, many of us became familiar with giardia bacteria and/or amoebas that sent us speed walking and sometime running through the night to our latrines. Sometimes we made it; sometimes we didn't. During those episodes, we learned to sleep with a makaresh and a flashlight within reach. These problems became particularly important when they intersected with eight-hour taxi rides to Noukchott or anywhere else in the country we might have been going for work or play during which latrines were scarce. When this happened, topics such as *fart confidence* and *Imodium* were particularly important as they affected the quality of other volunteers' and Mauritians' experiences in the car.

Once shit and shitting paraphernalia became normal and necessary topics of conversation other expectations of normalcy readjust easily, and eventually you start seeing the advantages of using the left hand.

Dudu and I carried my rolling luggage through the sand on our way to the N'Diaye compound. I didn't really need help, but I let him because he was eager. We walked under the domineering sun on paths between a few short walls and barb-wire fences that outlined boundaries of neighborhood compounds. People stared from under limbars, small pavilion structures with a metka, or a platform structure, underneath. The roofs cast dark shade so that I couldn't see faces, but I smiled anyway, assuming that they were welcoming because I was a volunteer and an American, and I thought at the time that those were reasons to be welcomed. I forgot the difference between my good intentions and those of European colonialists, or at least thought that people would separate them, which they usually did, but not always. Later, I would learn that like saying hello in Mauritania such distinctions are *a lot more complicated and important than you would think*.

Fatimetou responded to comments and questions that I didn't understand. Children, sometimes under the limbar and sometimes playing outside, sometimes with a shirt and pants and sometimes without, chirped words I did know, ones that I would hear in my sleep for the next two years. Second-year volunteers at the center explained that each of the languages in Mauritania had a word for westerner or Christian, and each of the words was fun to say—*toubab*, *toubaco*, *nasrani*—which is why I thought they said them at first.

Houses similar to Rajal's house stood behind or next to most limbars. The mud bricks and cinder blocks were mixed from local sand or river clay so that the houses appeared part of the ground as if glacial deposits. The pattern repeated across the horizon and blurred in the radiant heat. Some compounds had a charcoal stove outside the limbar and a blackened pot on top of the stove leftover from lunch. Sticky hints of cooking oil, fried things, and charcoal

smoke piqued my nose. Then, human shit from a latrine, sand darkened by goat piss, and trash cooking in the sun just outside someone's fence in a half-buried pile. The sand that covered the trash appeared wind-blown.

I felt a touch of pride that the trash and smells didn't surprise me this time. In fact, I thought the path we were walking was clean. I breathed deeply, thinking stink was something I would get used to. Our third day in Kaedi, one of the second year volunteers, Tarn, led a group of trainees outside the high school walls. We were all excited because the walls were fifteen-feet tall and spiked with shards of broken glass and scraps of rusty metal so that we hadn't seen anything beyond them except for trees. We passed the guards at the door and soon strolled like tourists down the main street through the market, one of the largest in Mauritania, toward the Senegal River. Once we reached the edge of the market, a comfortable breeze from the river cooled the sweat on my arms, and then caused me to gag. The smell was heavy. It was shit; it was rot; it was purification. I couldn't identify the complexity of its parts, but I could feel them settle in my hair. We glanced around at each other, restraining our ugly faces. We were trying not to react to what seemed normal in Mauritania. As visitors in the country, we weren't ready yet to show our displeasure.

I gulped air through my mouth, which lessened the smell, but some of the air leaked into my nasal passages. Tarn smirked and breathed deeply. He knew exactly what he was leading us into and enjoyed it. I imagine that watching us cringe was validating of how far he'd come in one year. It demonstrated the distance between the trainee and the second-year volunteer—the amount of adjustment that was in my future.

The road rose into a levee surrounded by flood plains that served as part-time soccer fields and the market dump. Trash piled where the gravel walls of the levee intersected with the

flood plain. The contents appeared black and stirred by decomposition. A few dogs and goats picked through the leavings. Much of it stewed in puddles from the previous night's rain. The smell had evaporated into the air, which is why it felt so heavy. Old stalwarts or new additions included: shiny and rusting tin cans; flattened green tea boxes and blue milk cartons; pastel-colored, plastic bowls, buckets, and makareshes, which were broken, patched, and broken again; shredded tires and pieces of inner tube; worn or broken sandals; shriveled potatoes and carrots, ruptured tomatoes, mold-eaten onions and heads of cabbage that had rotted in the heat before sellers could sell them; gooey clumps of chicken feathers; carcasses of fish, goats, sheep, and donkeys in varying stages of death—bloated, half-eaten, bloody pelts, whole and partial skeletons, empty rib cages, skulls, legs, and jaw bones missing teeth. It occurred to me that as repulsive as the trash was, none of it was unfamiliar. I'd thrown much of it away myself at one point or another. In the West, we just hide it better. I wasn't sure that hiding it was solution. At least in Kaedi, they were aware of what they threw away.

The smell overpowered us, and we increased our pace toward the river. None of us spoke. The trash appeared to lessen closer to the river. A boy, who was playing soccer in the field, jogged over to shit where the trash was thinner and sprinted back to his game. One of the trainees asked why he shit among the trash. Tarn responded, *Where else can he shit?* I looked around for a latrine, and he was right; there were none. Tarn grinned, *He wouldn't want to shit where he plays, would he?*

Once we reached the river, the air was breathable again. The levee turned to the West across the flood plain. I thought that it looked like a good place to run. I asked if volunteers did that, and he replied that he didn't know, but volunteers who lived in villages outside of Kaedi biked it into town. Other trainees asked Tarn questions about why all the trash was there, and he

responded, *Where would you put it?* We had all come to Mauritania to fix things, and this was an obvious problem that needed fixing, so his question seemed like a challenge. Not only that, we all thought we were capable at that moment. Each of us voiced ideas that Tarn answered with questions: *Who do you want to collect it? Are you going to do it? Where are you going to find a government in Mauritania functional enough and that cares enough to organize a trash collection service?*

I imagined spending hours under the terrible sun, putting trash in garbage bags and picking them up in truck later. I felt heroic. I thought that I could do it. Then Tarn, as if he heard my thoughts, asked, *Even if you were to pick up the trash, what would keep it from accumulating again? Who would pick it up after you're gone?* Silence pervaded the trainees. I didn't have an answer, even one that I kept to myself. I worried that all of Mauritania was covered in trash.

Tarn acknowledged that some volunteers had ideas that worked as temporary fixes. One volunteer convinced the high school soccer team to do door-to-door trash pickup in order to raise money. Another taught herself to knit with plastic bags, and then taught a Mauritanian woman's cooperative. One turned rice sacks into attractive handbags. There were even a few places that had a local trash-pickup service, but, Tarn said, *Those are organized by local Mauritians, and that's the way it has to be. If Mauritians don't want it, it won't get done.* Some second-year volunteers had warned us that some of their colleagues had grown cynical and jaded and that we should weigh everything we hear, but I didn't think Tarn was one of these volunteers. He didn't say any of these things with malice. He was just being honest.

We stepped off the levee and walked toward the river. I stared across it into Senegal, and felt some accomplishment to look upon another African country. I was surprised that it looked

the same as Mauritania without the city. Dry scrub grass divided the view into tawny and blue jeans. Smooth sand tracks interrupted the rough grass, and cagey stick figures guided black electric lines across the blue.

We asked how people crossed, and Tarn said by canoe. *The only official crossings are at Goura, to the east near Selebaby, and Rosso, south of Nouakchott. Rosso is the big one.* Then we asked if volunteers crossed. He smiled and said, *If you get permission from Peace Corps.* He seemed to hold something back, and we pressed him further. He added, *Some volunteers who live by the river do it more often. Senegal's a lot nicer. At night, at some places along the river, the Mauritanian side is completely black and the Senegalese side looks like it's on fire. It's the same in Mali.*

He paused. We all stared at Senegal with envy, waiting for him to continue. A canoe passed on the river. A few men, dressed only in shorts, were unloading their boats on shore. Children splashed down river from us. Out of the corner of my eyes, I noticed a donkey pulling a cart with a load and a couple of teenagers walking next to it. Tarn continued with a crooked smile, *Some Senegalese volunteers just across the river play Playstation in their houses at night while we read books by headlamp or candle light. Sometimes,* he added, *you have to break the rules. Mauritians and Senegalese don't really view it as a border, so if your family goes to visit relatives on the other side, are you going to stay behind? But if you cross without permission, don't get caught. You'll get kicked out.*

We stood in silence, most of us probably weighing the risk and reward. I imagined that the electricity was nice, but something about *Playstation* felt too familiar. I didn't come to Mauritania to live an American lifestyle. To do so seemed to miss the point. The donkey cart that had been approaching was now stopped in the river. The donkey cart's load was a dead

donkey. The teenagers pulled at the legs, and after considerable effort, the carcass splashed into the water. The donkey's ribcage rose above the surface. Tarn smiled and said, *Well, there's your trash-disposal service. You all ready to head back?* Some trainees chuckled nervously. I didn't know how to react. Didn't Mauritians know how unsanitary this was? Did people drink the river water? Was this something that I needed to adjust to or to work to change? I didn't have any answers at that point, and later, when I thought I had answers, I always found reasons to question them. We turned toward school; the walls were inviting.

As Fatimetou, Dudu, and I walked through the neighborhood toward their compound, my worries about whether the entire country resembled the trash-strewn plain outside the Kaedi market faded. Suddenly Tinzah seemed liveable, almost pleasant. People seemed to care for their personal spaces more than the public ones.

As it often happened early in my service, a new worry replaced the old one. We'd been walking, and I had no sense of time or place because when I go somewhere new, where everything's different, and I don't know what to expect. But when I felt like we'd been walking for too long, I glanced back and realized that I had no idea from where we came. Everything looked the same. Only a few trees rose above the cobbled skyline. Even the sand path was indistinguishable from others that dead-ended at compounds. I felt nauseous. Monday I would have to figure out how to get back to Rajal's for class, and I had no idea how I would do that. I imagined wandering through curious stares, choosing the wrong paths and getting lost. Normally losing my way wasn't a problem, but in Mauritania, I couldn't communicate with anyone, so I couldn't ask directions. I believed that I was helpless.

As I often do when something goes wrong, I blamed myself. I thought that I should have been paying attention to the route rather than daydreaming. *I'm screwed*, I thought. Moments later, as if reading my eyes, Fatimetou pointed to her wrist and said, *Lundi*. I balked at her voice, and panicked again: *I hope she doesn't think I know French*. I learned some my freshman year of high school eleven years ago. She pointed to me—*Toi et Dudu*. She pointed back towards Rajal's compound and raised her eyebrows—*L'ecole*. I looked at her curiously before I figured out what she was saying. I smiled, relieved. Not only did she solve my problem, but I understood her. I mined my memory for some French, and then asked her if she spoke French. She pinched her thumb and pointer finger. I smiled, and said, *Me too*. We had something in common. And this was how we communicated for the first few weeks—a common word in French or Hassaniya, exaggerated facial expressions, and a lot of hand gestures. At the time it was frustrating, but later I decided that learning to communicate without talking was almost as important as learning to talk. Even when I was functional in French and Hassaniya, I learned more from what was unsaid.

Then Fatimetou announced, *La maison*. The compound was larger than Rajal's, but the wall was mud brick and incomplete. In the back along a sand track, it was tall enough to keep goats out, on the sides between empty lots, it was just tall enough to trip over, and at the front, it didn't exist at all. I wondered what it was keeping out. Later, I learned that it didn't keep out much. We passed the latrine and entered the yard that stretched for fifty meters to a two-room house, a shade tree, and a limbar. Dudu panted as he struggled with his end. Other children waiting at the limbar stood up. Fatimetou opened my room with a skeleton key. The room looked like an empty concrete cell. I soon learned, however, that it wasn't empty. Holes in the walls housed cockroaches; low spots in the floor collected the rain water that dripped through

and soaked my books; a small, barred window near the floor provided enough space for a goat to squeeze its head through and bleat until I unlocked its horns; the corrugated metal roof absorbed and trapped so much heat that it was never tolerable.

I lifted my suitcase above the threshold, and left it to sit under the limbar. Eyes like acorns, buckeyes, and almonds stared at me. I stared back with eyes like robin eggs. Two older women were frowns on the mat below the metka, covering the sand floor. One bounced a baby in her lap. The children fidgeted. I drank some bleached training-center water from my bottle. Children, I believed, were more accessible than adults because they welcomed other forms of communication besides talking, so on this first day, I started with them, hoping the adults would warm to me. I knew how to ask someone's name in Hassaniya, so I started with the toddler in a pink dress with unruly hair and a snot-painted upper lip. She stared at me as if I'd stolen something from her. *Hapsa*, others answered for her. A young woman, almost twenty, with clear eyes and big teeth seemed the most excited and loud because her voice carried. *I'm Mentu*, she insisted. Her mulafa framed a face that I wouldn't know how to improve. I looked away, afraid that they might give this away.

I repeated her name and continued around the limbar. Aminetou wore a dress with a broken zipper so that the shoulder was falling down her arm. She was the second oldest after Dudu, and I didn't trust her. She didn't seem shy enough as if she thought she already knew me. Baba was missing his front teeth. He pointed to the gap triumphantly. He seemed to follow Aminetou, and later I figured out they were brother and sister. All the names were so unfamiliar that I had to repeat them numerous times. Even now I've forgotten the names of youngest boy and the second youngest girl. I remember that the girl made the snot-nosed look cute.

The game excited the children, so they started on body parts, which I hadn't learned yet. Aminetou pointed to her nose, and I shrugged. She said a word I couldn't pronounce, and I repeated it incorrectly. She said it again, and I said it back, and all the children said, *No*. I giggled, and Aminetou slapped the metka. I tried again and pronounced it passably. Baba told me the word for ear, which was harder to pronounce than the word for nose. It didn't help that he mispronounced it because of his missing front teeth. I failed again, and they laughed harder. Next they taught me 'mouth', which was easy, and then 'eyes' and 'teeth'. Then Dudu went back to nose, and as hard as I tried, as much as I wanted to show them that I was smart and that I would learn this language someday soon, I failed to remember. Mentu tried ear again, and I had forgotten that one too.

All of the faces overwhelmed me. Another, Mohammed, a teenager a few years younger than Mentu entered the limbar. Everything stopped almost out of reverence for him, I thought. Even the older women acknowledged him. He sat on the metka and didn't say anything and the game continued.

They ran through more body parts: knee, arm, head, and hair. The body parts piled next to my failures, and I quickly tired of the game. I couldn't possibly memorize all these body parts. I reassured myself that I was intelligent; that I could learn the language. It was just that the heat was too hot, and I hadn't slept because of the sand and the wind and the heat. But I didn't know how to say, *Enough*, so the body parts kept coming, and I just started shrugging until finally they became bored with the game, and we sat and stared at each other again.

Fatimetou, who had been observing the whole time, said something that I didn't understand, and Dudu's face brightened. He said something to Aminetou who said something to Baba. Then they started singing in a garbled language that I'd never heard before. They sung

until they stopped, and then they looked at me expectantly. I didn't know what to say even if I could say it, so I shrugged and they started again. I listened more closely this time, and I recognized the tune, a few English words, and then the "E-I-E-I-O" refrain. I grinned. I wondered where they learned the song. I started singing "Old MacDonald" with them; this time I got to correct their pronunciation. This made me feel a little better. But after we made it through the song once, they lost interest and we stared at each other again.

I struggled with the feeling that I should entertain; that I should be more interesting. We started making faces at each other and making sounds with our mouths using our tongues and fingers, but without any ability to communicate through speech that too ended quickly. When Fatimetou slowly moved under the shade tree where she cut vegetables and prepared dinner, I felt insufficient even though I knew my expectations were not theirs and were ridiculous. I don't even know what I imagined should have happened. But after Fatimetou left, the children's attention went elsewhere as well. Dudu juggled pebbles, Aminetou played with Hapsa, and Baba played with his toes. The baby nursed, cried, or slept.

I too left, thinking that sitting around without talking was pointless. I learned later that this was another adjustment I would have to make because sitting around was what Mauritians did in the afternoons because it was too hot to do anything else. I went to my room to read the *Cross-Culture Manual* because that's what I read when I wondered what I did wrong. Pre-service training, it promised, *is probably the toughest part of Peace Corps. There is so much that you used to take for granted, but is now no longer familiar to you: the food, climate, natural landscape, languages spoken, and means of communicating between people. You may feel a bit overwhelmed at the beginning, especially soon after your facilitator hands you over to the care*

*of your host family.*² Evidently, I was supposed to feel this way. It assured me that life would get easier, and I believed it.

The revelation of my first day in Tinzah was the bucket bath. After reading the *Manual*, I assembled my water filter first because I would need water to drink soon. When I asked Fatimetou for water, she asked me if I wanted to bathe because Mauritians know how good it feels in the middle of the day. I refused the first time because I didn't want to appear weak, and accepted when she insisted because the heat was winning.

Fatimetou poured water into my bucket, and I carried it, a cup, and peanut soap to the latrine. Bucket bathes were the norm in Mauritania, and this was my first attempt at it because the school had showers. The corrugated-metal door squealed. My sandals shuffled on the cement floor and the bucket clacked as I set it down and the handle bounced off the side. Flies buzzed from the rim of the hole and their sound reverberated off of the four walls until it escaped over them at about the level of my shoulders. A few people passed near-by, but I looked away before we could make eye contact. I was skeptical of the bucket bath because I imagined that the relief would be fleeting. Instead, the experience oscillated between pleasure and misery, which intensified both. Relief spread over my skin as electricity when I took off my clothes and released the moist heat that they had collected over the day into the open air. This pleasure only lasted seconds before I felt the sun gnawing at my skin, but the slow-forming discomfort only intensified the relief. As I poured a large cupful over my head, water charged through my skin as if reversing its polarity. It braided down my face and tickled the contours between my eyes, nose, and lips. It splashed and darkened the floor as if an inkblot.

For a moment I forgot the sun, the flies, and the moist smell rising out of the hole until I felt the burning of the sun on my scalp again. Another cupful assuaged the pain, and then

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another. Unlike a shower, the pleasure of which lessens the longer you draw it out, each cupful brought me similar intensity as the first. Unfortunately, the bucket had a bottom, and I had soap on my body, drying quickly. I picked it up and dumped the remainder over my head. The water clattered to floor, and suddenly it was finished.

Later, until the camel spider showed up, the end satisfied me as much as the beginning because I had the opportunity to see what I had made. The entire floor had changed from white to marbled gray, streaked brown with wet sand. Some water had splattered the walls with dark spots. The space smelled cleaner. The changes reminded me, when it seemed like everything was acting upon me, that I too could act on and have a presence in the world even though I knew it would soon evaporate. After the bucket bath, the rest of the day at the N'Diaye compound was easier.

Chapter 3 – Enduring a Coup

Chapter Summary

In many ways, this chapter is a continuation of the previous one, expanding upon tensions created by cross-cultural exchange. The chapter opens with me returning from school having just learned that a coup has successfully overthrown the government. This allows me to introduce the reader to Mauritanian politics and racial dynamics, which I'm not entirely aware of at the time and will elaborate on in later chapters. I'm excited to discuss these new developments with my host family. I find Hussein, a host brother about my age, and a friend finishing lunch, and am surprised that they would rather talk about Bob Marley. During the conversation, Hussein refers to me as his friend, my first in Mauritania. The rest of the chapter relates what his friendship entails and the deterioration of the host-family situation in general when my host mother contracts malaria. What I learn from the experience is how to function independently within the family, which gives me confidence that I can survive in Mauritania.

Chapter 4 – Rebuilding

Chapter Summary

This chapter takes place during my first days in my permanent site, Kankossa. I move into the *Maison de Passage*, a house that different Peace Corps volunteers had lived in for almost twenty years, and eat with a host-family that had played that role for almost as many years. I frame the chapter around rebuilding the limbar, a pavilion-like structure that Mauritians spend much of their time under, in the front yard that my predecessor had allowed to fall into disrepair. At this point, however, buying materials and rebuilding the limbar are above my abilities, so I rely on Abdrhamane, one of my new host brothers, to help. In addition, I try to follow up on some of the contacts my two predecessors maintained while living there, which involves delivering photos one of the volunteers sent from the US to a family. From this experience and others in town, I start to understand how much the community loved the two volunteers and the subtle and less subtle expectations it has for me, which I feel obliged to fulfill. At the same time, I feel that I must distinguish myself from my predecessors as people in town are constantly measuring me by them.

Chapter 5 – Of Sheep, Wood Smoke, and Cheating

Chapter Summary

After settling, at least physically, into the community, school begins, and I must teach. In order to setup my early experience, I flashback to model school, one week during training when Peace Corps recruited local students for education volunteers to practice on. Having never taught before, the first few days are a disaster. By the week's end, however, I feel pretty confident about job. What volunteers had warned me about and what I forgot was that the model school students were also model students. Consequently, I am ill prepared to manage the challenges of teaching English in English to students who do not speak English in a real Mauritanian classroom with thirty to sixty students and insufficient supplies or administrative support.

Chapter 6 – Passing an Afternoon

I waited on the elbow of a braided root, sweating in patchy shade under confetti-shaped acacia leaves. The root jutted from the steep landing that descended to the *Wadi Karakoro*. The seasonal river had long since become a seasonal lake; its silty water shrank from its banks and pinched at both ends as the sun's hegemony gained with the approaching hot season. A cacophony of squeals, splashes, and guffaws broadcasted the theatrics of raucous play—flailing arms, crashing bodies, sudden dives, and the collapse of disembodied legs extending above the water. Children sent plumes of white water into the air as if given to fly. I was jealous of their fun. Only the children were enjoying the heat. Pulaar and black Moor that is. White Moors don't swim Ahmed once told me.

Others, men and women, waited. They were dotted across the sand under the caustic sun as if territorial shrubs, staring at the canoe that would take us to Kankossa II plodding across the lake. The men squatted in on their hams against the incline of the landing dressed alike. They wore soft blue or white, *dara'as*—flowing sheets with arm and head holes lined with careful, gold embroidery. They stretched the excess fabric over their heads as cowls. Underneath, they wore *sirwals*, billowy pants cuffed at the shins. Ahmed told me once that they like their clothes as they enjoy life, unencumbered.

Between their legs, some played with their belts; a strip of leather clasped in the middle, allowing equal lengths to swing or dangle sometimes to their knees. It was an accessory created for waiting, a toy or a stress reliever, for slapping one's hand, knee, or a nearby person, preferably a female, as well as twirling, stroking, and squeezing. The pastime often became an unconscious tick, and some diddled with their belts just as others chewed on pen caps.

The women sat or stood. Squatting wasn't possible. They wrapped their bodies, ankles to head, in *mulafas*, yards of tie-dyed tissue, some piebald and others fluorescent colors, soot, or indigo. The outfit hobbled them, as if animals sent to graze. Pious women didn't walk, they shuffled. Pink and blue plastic bags of cow parts, couscous, and Maggi boullion cubes hung from their fingers. Dinner. Some held children or a child's hand. They were returning for lunch from their selling tables in the Kankossa I market. The canoe seemed to have stalled.

* * * *

Ahmed lived in Kankossa II, the part of town where people moved to be closer to their millet fields. But he was a math and science teacher, a white Moor of the noble Kunta tribe, warriors whose ancestral lands followed the charred Baatin fault, a ferrous scar that arced from the east through the middle of Mauritania. Ahmed was from N'Beika, an oasis coddled by black cliffs and sand dunes along one of the few passes through the Baatin.

A week ago he invited me to spend the afternoon with him. I promised to arrive between twelve and one. His face strained when I told him. It was too hot at twelve to travel, he told me. I agreed, but inside my house I was free to wear shorts. In public, in a Muslim country, pants were a necessity, but when temperatures climbed above 100 degrees, cloths were intolerable. Not only is Kankossa on the edge of the Sahara, but it traps heat between the dunes that line the eastern border and western boundaries. Doum palms, clustered in frazzled groves on both sides of the river, compressed the air from above.

On the landing, heat rose from the sand. Sweat poured from our bodies, coaxed only by the strain of living. I knew twelve was late, but I planned on staying at Ahmed's until four and that would be enough time to maintain decorum.

* * * *

On Kankossa II, abandoned boutiques lined the hill from the river. Their corrugated metal doors were closed and padlocked with little to suggest the morning's activity. Those of us traveling too late trudged with our loads through the deep sand without acknowledging each other. Thermals, curtains of heat, stretched and pulled our view of town as it emerged above the hill. Individuals began to drift from our group as if drawn by magnetism to tracks in the sand that signified little except to those who trod them daily. Although the terrain often swallowed the tracks before their destination, they usually led to limbars, wood or cement structures with only supporting posts and patchwork cloth or canvas roofs. A few tracks led to one room cement boxes whose walls were only interrupted by one or two shy windows protected by bars. Only a few multi-room houses disrupted the horizon.

The white Moor population on Kankossa II explained the predominance of limbars. Traditionally, they ranged throughout West Sahara on routes from well to well between caravan towns, date palmeries, or oases where their camels could graze. In the past fifty years, however, droughts have dried the Sahara further. Years instead of months have separated days of rainfall, which has exhausted wells, dried palmeries, and depleted vegetation, decimating camel herds and sending the Bedouin south to towns that grew too quickly into cities. Yet the white Moors remain Bedouins in spirit, loyal to family, tribe, and open air. For many, houses are places of storage or reception. Life exists under a limbar, the lightest commitment to permanence, in the elements with family and their animals—cows, goats, sheep, or chickens. They are minimalists to the extreme but keep their possessions close. A propane burner, tea, three tea glasses, sugar, mint, a platter, silver mixing bowls, and a saw-horse table. Even when they settle in a town it is semi-permanence. They maintain space between their neighbors so that a Moor town is less a community than a squatters' park. For three months in the rainy season, many vacate the

cramped town for the sheltering desert sky in nostalgia for their preterit loneliness. They stake wing-shaped Bedouin tents and pass days digesting camel milk and dates while their animals graze on wiry grasses that sprout with the rains. The idea is mobility; they are always ready to move.

* * * *

Past a row of poodle-tailed neheem trees, past ochre grade-school buildings, the horizon opened. Limbars and intermittent houses stacked three and four deep stretched for a quarter of a mile in front of a bump of dune that separated town from the countryside. I searched the scattered dwellings for a memory. I'd visited Ahmed at his limbar months earlier in the cool season when a verdant rug laid precariously a top the sand, distinguishing tracks and providing contrast, but since the land had dried tawny. The cement plaster on the houses, the view through the hollow limbars, a few wispy acacias all resembled the adust terrain that extended on a clear day to the Assaba massif that interrupted the desert twenty miles away. Taken together, the hangers were as distinct as haystacks in an autumn field. Only an aquamarine house provided a reliable marker. On my first visit I wandered looking for Ahmed's limbar, too weary of my language skills to ask, and eventually found it. Since, my language skills had improved and in this overbearing sun, I asked directions at the closest hanger. "Salaam Alekum!—Peace be with you," I called before peering under the transom.

"W'alekum Salaam—And peace be with you," the rote drone murmured from below. Three adults sprawled on a wooden dias. Two clumpy white Moor women dozed on their stomachs under their pink, brown, and orange *mulafas* spread in tufts. A stringy man propped his back against soiled pillows in a tee-shirt and light blue *sirwal*. Tradition dictated these

positions as the inverse had sexual connotations. A young black Moor girl prepared lunch in a large gray pot, occasionally banging the perforated, metal spoon on the rim to dislodge the sticky white rice. The man rolled lethargically towards me.

“Do you know where Ahmed Budda’s house is? The math and science teacher?” I asked.

He consulted the women, “No.”

“Thank you.” I questioned three more limbars. At the fourth, a man ordered his son:

“Take him to Ahmed.”

* * * *

Ahmed emerged from the concrete limbar. His wide smile narrowed his bony face, outlined by a black beard, dark sunglasses, and charcoal hair. Despite being a white Moor, his skin was the color of worn, brown leather.

“Salaam Alekum!” He shook my hand vigorously. “Nothing bad I hope?”

“Nothing bad, thank God!” We rolled through greeting as if a staring contest. We asked about family and friends and any recent illness we may have had although neither of us had been sick. “Please come. You are welcome.” Under the hanger, thick pillars supported an A-frame skeleton covered by stiff, cream canvas. His sister-in-law was hurrying to make *zrig*. She drew cool water from the goat skin, hanging from a red and yellow painted saw-horse table in the corner. She added powdered milk and sugar, and roasted gum Arabic, sap from an *acacias Senegal*, which made gritty snaps as she crushed it in her fingers. “Come sit down!” Ahmed tossed a pillow in my direction. “Why did you come so late?” he asked. “You should have come at eleven. You’re crazy for walking in this heat!”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged, embarrassed that I couldn’t tell the truth. I relaxed on the dais, leaning on the pillow.

Ahmed's son huddled behind the sister-in-law's shoulder and looked at me in horror. He wore a peppermint striped shirt that ended just above his naked waist. I smiled and waved. He dipped lower so that only his eyes and black curls peeked from behind his aunt. His sister-in-law whisked the cloudy liquid and Ahmed pushed it towards me. "Here, Jeremy, drink!" I cradled the full bowl and tipped to my face. My teeth clenched the metal and a soft aluminum taste seeped into my mouth quickly followed by the creamy *zrig*, sweet and caramelized from the gum Arabic. I felt the liquid into my chest and for a moment I felt respite from the heat.

"Drink! Drink!" Ahmed encouraged, but decorum contradicted his commands. Hospitality in Mauritania is overflowing, but equality is implicit in the idea. But even equality has a hierarchy. I passed the bowl to Ahmed who gulped audibly and passed it to his sister-in-law. The toddler now on her lap pled for it with both hands. He took a slobbery draught, a string clinging to the bowl as she pulled it away before drinking herself. His eyes crossed, his mouth whined, and he reached for the bowl again. But she ignored him and placed it on the floor. Ahmed leaned toward me and whispered, "Remember not to mention his mother. It makes him sad." I assured him that I wouldn't. On my previous visit, he explained that she was in the Tagant with her family. In Mauritania, the government places teachers outside of their home region in order to encourage racial amelioration. As a result, white Moor teachers work in the predominantly black African South while black Africans work in the North. While Kankossa is split, Ahmed's wife was more comfortable in the Tagant, a Moor stronghold.

As we were talking, a white, bleating streak charged for the *zrig* bowl. The new-born lamb hoofed the rim, splashing us and spilling the *zrig* on the mat covering the cement foundation. The sister-in-law weakly slapped at the lamb and cursed it, "Gsar um ur-ak—May God burn your mother!" It ducked the blow and rushed to lap the spill before it escaped between

the dull black and green weave of the plastic mat. Its pink tongue flicked rapidly from its white nose while its darting eyes and jittering muscles anticipated the next blow. But it didn't come, and the lamb relaxed into a measured pace.

Ahmed's son glared at the lamb from his aunt's lap. He was jealous that it was stealing his drink, and proved more motivated than his aunt. He eased still pant-less off the dais into the puddle of *zrig* and tromped up behind the lamb. His legs bowed and his waist bent as he cocked his hand above his head and paused for balance. In that moment, the lamb raised its head, its mouth still jawing the liquid, and as the boy's hand fell, the lamb bleated in sharp bursts, and darted forward just enough that the tiny hand glanced off its hindquarters and slapped the *zrig* puddle. His face recoiled, messed and crumpled, milky droplets scattered across his cheeks and forehead. A wail grew from between his clenched teeth and the sister-in-law snatched him from the mat, dried his feet with her *mulafa*, rocked, and shushed him while he sprawled his arms and legs to escape. Ahmed and I restrained our laughter.

"Come here! Come here!" Ahmed called his son. The boy cautiously wobbled to his lap. Ahmed pointed at me: "See Jeremy, see?" The boy buried his face in Ahmed's *dara'a*, but Ahmed lifted him and sat him next to me. His hands latched to Ahmed's sleeves as he tried to pull away. He screamed and cried. Everyone laughed except the boy and me. Ahmed tried again creating more laughter and screaming. The sister-in-law clapped at the game, and I contorted my lips in a fake smile, sad that I elicited such terror.

* * * *

The afternoon blazed from the open door and a low-lying window and painted the reception room in chiaroscuro. Excess cement oozed from the joints of the cinderblock walls as

if icing on a gingerbread house. The outdoor carpet was shaded black except in oblong rectangles where the light from the door and window shone it marron.

“Bismillah!” The muezzin breathed into the microphone. “Allaaaaaaah, Huwa Akbar! Allaaaaaaah, Huwa Akbar!” filled the desiccated air like perfume. Ahmed moved outside to perform ablutions. I propped an elbow on a royal blue and gold pillow that matched the *mattela*—a covered foam mattress—that I was lying on to read a book. Ahmed had suggested that we moved inside because it was cooler, but the heat congested within the cement box. Sweat collected in streams that began at my forehead and ran down my cheek bones to my chest. The confluence formed pools at my stomach, and my belly button was Mariana Trench. From my stomach, the streams emptied on the *mattela*, gradually darkening my silhouette on the fabric. In such heat we tended to discuss our misery, and since Ahmed was a science teacher, I thought he might have an internal thermometer. Only science could prove the extent of our misery, a kind of masochistic delight.

When he returned from praying, Ahmed didn’t satisfy; he only promised the heat would worsen. I marveled at the thought and tried to picture myself teaching from twelve to three. He relaxed on his *mattela* across the room and asked about my teaching schedule since the director of studies, Souleymane, had moved class back an hour for the hot season.

“Jeremy, this isn’t good. I finish before noon.” I shrugged, unsure what to do. “They do this to all volunteers because they know you will teach and not complain.”

“Maybe I will talk with him.” I didn’t know whether to feel proud of our reputation or angry that Souleymane was manipulating our pride to take advantage of us. Often Mauritians considered the volunteer work ethnic naïve, fighting a system that only God can change. Yet it justified our existence, the futility. The volunteers I knew soon realized that the meteoric change

we expected to enact was unlikely, and instead, we contributed by suffering. We became anchorites, exiling ourselves in the desert, absconding our western amenities. It became a competition of who could suffer the most, and some failed to escape it. Others, the ones that finished their service happy, learned to adjust their expectations. Their focus changed from projects to people so that they judged success and failure less on completion than on the number of laughs they achieved along the way.

* * * *

A knock at the door pulled me from unconsciousness. The soporific heat had drugged Ahmed and me into heavy sleep. I gasped as if asphyxiated by the thick air and pushed away from the soggy pillow. My eyes focused as a teenage boy stepped through the glowing door. He greeted us, and sat cross-legged against the wall farthest from the light. I recognized his buck teeth, and solemn lope. “Jeremy. Do you recognize this boy? He’s my nephew.” Ahmed asked.

“I do. He’s in my fourth year class.”

“Do you remember his name?” I thought for a moment. The boy had attended class twice perhaps.

“No. He doesn’t come to class enough.” Ahmed chuckled and turned to the boy.

“Mohammed Lemine, what’s your problem? Why don’t you go to English class? Don’t you like it?” Mohammed smiled nervously.

“I like English, but it’s after lunch, and it’s a long way to walk back to school. It’s very hard in this heat.” Ahmed asked him,

“Don’t you want to learn English and travel to the United States to make lots of money?” His grin belied his trickery. Ahmed had admitted to me in a previous visit that he had no interest

in leaving Mauritania. He viewed living and teaching here as his religious duty in spite of the difficulty. Mohammed equivocated. He didn't appear to me as a boy with huge dreams. He seemed content with his situation. He would marry, raise cattle, and maybe run a store. But he fidgeted while answering as if his opinions didn't align with what he thought we wanted him to say. I helped him out.

“Mauritania is a good country. I don't know why you would want to leave.”

* * * *

“Jeremy! Jeremy! Lunch! Come eat!” Ahmed and Mohammed squatted on their hams as the sister-in-law spread a paisley cloth on the floor near the door. I braced myself against my knees to straighten the spinning room and peeled my wet shirt from my back, drawing a rush of air that cooled the sweat on my skin. “Come on, Jeremy. Food's here.” The sister-in-law entered with a platter of rice and meat that she placed in center of the cloth. The tactile smell of unseasoned beef confronted me. A green wash basin circulated between us, and we doused each other's hands with water removing the thin lather of peanut-oil soap. I kneeled with my back to the door. When everyone had washed, we each mentally cut the platter into fourths and hovered over our portions. “Bismillah!” Ahmed announced and our right hands eased toward the rice. Ahmed's son immediately reached for a chunk of meat emerged from mound. He fisted it towards his mouth, but before his hand left the platter, the sister-in-law slapped his hand, sending the meat back to the rice.

“Wait! It's hot!” The boys lips curled to cry, but he reached for another chunk.

As he reached for more, my fingers sunk into the gooey pile. The heat quickly stung them and I drew back. I was over zealous, and Ahmed coached me about the obvious. “Jeremy, you know if you take rice from the top it's not as hot.” The others mechanically balled the rice

and shoved it into their mouths unaffected by the temperature. I tried again. Skimming grains from the pile into my palm, I gently rotated and pressed the sticky rice into a ball. The bland rice squished between my teeth before I swallowed and reached for another handful. Ahmed had tossed pieces of meat into my portion, so I crammed one into a rice ball. I chomped into the meat and immediately ground a bone shard between my teeth. I winced and ran my tongue across my teeth to make sure I hadn't chipped one and then worked the shard to the front of my mouth and discreetly removed it. Instead of chewing the meat, I just swallowed it. By that time, Ahmed's son was masticating contently on his own piece.

The next few pieces were less jarring, and I was making progress with my portion, although far behind the others, when I heard the lamb bleating behind me. Before I could turn my head, a white blur entered my peripheral vision. Instinctively, my left hand clamped onto the lamb's neck with its snout inches above the rice. Its cry sounded like baby, as its eyes bulged and mouth stretched towards the platter. It dug into the carpet and fought against my grip. I strained to avoid using my right hand covered in rice. Finally, Mohammed grabbed the lamb, and pulled him by his head towards the door. The lamb fought and with a swift wiggle freed himself. Again, it darted for the platter, but I was ready, and my hand found its neck. This time Mohammed cradled the crying lamb and took it outside. "That was close," Ahmed chuckled. The sister-in-law shook her head:

"That lamb is a bandit!" Yet it was affectionate disapproval as if she admired its persistence. I returned to the platter without hesitation. "Eat, eat." Ahmed commanded. Shortly, the sister-in-law pulled from the plate. Ahmed divided what the other two left between us. As I put my last ball to my mouth, hooves scurried behind me. This time I was late. The lamb went all in and leapt from the edge of the cloth onto the platter, creating a white explosion

that sent rice across the room. The shock distracted us enough so that when we recovered, it was already chomping greedily. Yet its eyes never left us, and its tail straightened in preparation for a quick retreat. But we burst into laughter at our defeat.

* * * *

Clink, clink. Tea glasses bumped. I awoke to the gurgle of tea falling from a worn, navy pot into thick foam. “Teacher, your tea.” Mohammed lowered the silver tray with two shot glasses half-filled with algae-colored liquid and dirty white foam. The glass was warm and sticky, as I swallowed the medicine. Sweat streaked down my forehead and the syrupy tea burned my tongue and throat. For Mauritians, tea is supposed to be refreshing, something that gives them strength in the heat, but I struggled with the idea. Perhaps the scalding shot gives your body a measure to compare the air temperature. Mentally I recoiled from the taste, burnt leaves filtered through a sugar cube. But I replaced the glass and thanked him.

Two rounds left. Sharing tea is the ritual of Mauritanian hospitality. After the first glass, the guest is no longer a stranger. After the second, the guest is welcomed into the family. After the third, the guest always has a home. Despite the ritual’s sanctity, it’s repeated throughout the day in stores and under limbars. When enough friends gather, storeowners will coax a stray child to brew a pot and fetch bread. Men lounge in broken patio chairs, sacks of flour and rice, a wooden bench, and canisters of palm oil, and tea becomes a town meeting filled with local happenings and international news from BBC Arabic or Radio France. Debates crescendo. Passer-bys and customers join, creating an endless flow of people all drawn by three glasses of tea. The conversations moved too quickly for me, but I drank the tea for solidarity. But after a meal, rounds of tea often interrupted sleep to cope with the heat, and Ahmed had already succumbed, so I slipped away as well.

* * * *

“Alaaah, Huwa Akbar!” The muezzin seeped into the room as we finished our third glass of tea and the sweat on my arm turned to salt. *Asr*, the third prayer of the day, accompanied the sun’s decent; it was as much a wakeup call as *Fajr*, the first at six in the morning. It sent people back to work. When Ahmed returned from praying, we walked to his sister-in-law’s garden. The fence came to my knees and seemed to serve more as a suggestion than a useful deterrent to ranging cattle, goats, and sheep. She had a few wrinkled eggplants and some wilting tomatoes. “What does she want me to do?” I asked.

“She wants better fencing and a new well.” I looked to the one just beyond the garden.

“What’s wrong with that one?”

“She says it’s very low. They have to get water for the garden from the lake. It’s difficult for them.”

“Yes, I’m sure it is. But, I am a teacher, and at this point, at the end of the growing season . . . Ahmed, she really has to show more for Peace Corps to provide money for a well. I don’t know much about gardening, but if you want me to ask someone who does to give her advice, I will. Then next year, when has a full garden, I can come back, God willing.” I dreaded this part of the visit. I rarely escaped from a lunch visit without a request for patronage, which muddled any feelings of acceptance I felt throughout the day. Inevitably, I had to refuse my hosts who fed me, and then question the motivations for their invitation. Paranoia slowly infected my friendships, and I clung for sanity to those I thought genuine. I’d known Ahmed for months at this point, and he’d never asked anything from me, so I trusted his motivations.

“That’s alright. I understand. I just promised to ask.” More importantly, he understood my situation. He knew the stakes of the request; that if I provided a well for his sister-in-law that

everyone in town with a patch of grass would be at my doorstep asking for one too. I couldn't position myself as a patron, or that would cement my relationship with the town. He turned in the direction of town. "Are you ready to walk?"

* * * *

There was life in the expanse of sand between Ahmed's limbar and town. Children in pairs, threes, or groups with copybooks swinging by their sides pacing them hurried to school or strolled lazily from it, pushing, shoving, and jawing at each other. A donkey cart raced over the sand, bouncing precariously from one tire to the other, as the black Moor boy tried to steady his cargo of firewood and keep himself from flying off. He shouted threats and repeatedly buried his cudgel into its tailbone or hindquarters, each blow producing a sickening thud. The donkey wheezed under the abuse and eventually staggered.

"What will you do for vacation? You should visit me in N'Beika! You know there's another volunteer there. His name is . . . Greg."

"God willing, I would like to. Greg tells me it's beautiful, but I am going back to the United States for my brother's wedding and travel in Mauritania. Then, I want to go back to Kaedi to meet the incoming volunteers. Will you stay there all summer?"

"No. My boy misses his mother. I will take him back to her family, God willing. Then maybe I'll go to Nouakchott, but I'll return to Kankossa soon. I need to prepare my courses."

"Why don't you stay in N'Beika with your family?"

"It's difficult. It's my wife's family, and Kankossa's cooler." But I knew his father had died earlier in the year. I suspected the memories were too sharp.

* * * *

Above the landing the stores were no longer empty coffins. Tables lined the path, each with its own market of wares. Some were cluttered with dull potatoes and onions, battered weights and scales. Others piled bright carrots and a few tomatoes with okra and garlic. Variegated spice balls of shredded melegueta pepper, cinnamon, black pepper, henna, and rock salt cinched in plastic bags colored one table. Women selling the goods chattered loudly, enthusiastically slapping each other on the leg when one made a joke. A butcher across the landing barked at the women, trying to join them, while he tried to sell crusted, fly-ridden meat on his bloodstained chopping block, gnawed from machete blows. A group waited at the landing for the canoe. Children again swam close to the shore. Ahmed accompanied me to the water. I mentioned that I thought he should join the children. He grinned and told me I wasn't kind; he wasn't a child. At his insistence, I promised to visit again. The canoe scraped against the sandy shore. We shook hands: "With peace." He strolled up the hill, and I sat in the canoe waiting for the boy to push us off.

Chapter 7 – *Total* Oudane

Chapter Summary

During a much needed break from school, I travel to the North where a volunteer has organized a trash pickup and marathon in the city of Atar. Along the way, a volunteer from my training group, and I visit Rajal in Oudane, an ancient caravan town and home to Mauritania's oldest mosque, which is close-by. The experience introduces us to the difficulties of Mauritanian travel as the tires supporting the overloaded truck we are riding on rupture seven times before we hitch a ride with another truck near dusk that passes on the isolated road. We arrive in Oudane unannounced because cell phone service is so poor. We find Rajal as well as researchers hired by *Total*, a French oil company, who are exploring the possible social impact of oil exploration on the community and Bedouin culture. This creates the opportunity for me to discuss local perceptions of corporate development, which I am surprised are favorable.

Chapter 8 – Token White Man

Chapter Summary

Throughout my first year in Mauritania, my experience teaching is generally discouraging. I find satisfaction instead in another volunteer's project involving a new type of flour called CerAmine that utilizes more nutritious grains and legumes. The idea is to train a local representative to make it and help sell the idea to women's cooperatives in the area so that they can make the flour for their communities. We select Mohammed Lemine, the charismatic head of local cooperative (that ends up being his family), who agrees to travel with me to five villages in the area in exchange for a share of the product from the trainings. I condense these trips into the last training in a remote town called Hamoud on the Malian border. Mohammed Lemine is masterful at working with the cooperative, and I exist largely as a bystander, still too unfamiliar with the language to contribute much. Mohammed Lemine insists, though, that my presence is crucial; that I give the project credibility in the women's eyes. In addition, we get stuck in town an extra day because transport out is infrequent. This gives me the opportunity to tour the town and discuss its scarred history with development work.

Chapter 9 – Deep with Sand

Chinguetti was deep with sand. Mohammed, our driver, pulled against the steering wheel and rocked back and forth in his bucket seat to help the spinning tires. He'd driven through the new town and was determined to drive us to our destination, Sam's house, in the old. He'd gotten us stuck in between. *We're walking from here*, I said. He looked disappointed. Over the past two days, he and I had become friends as he drove us from Noukchott to Atar and from Atar to Chinguitti because we talked a lot. Our conversations wound in circles as the landscape rose from the coastal desert into the Adrar Mountains. They always returned to questions about the United States, and I always directed them away as the landscape reminded me of words I could say and questions I could ask. As we talked, his attention strayed from the road and his foot from the gas pedal. Jess, Kathy, and Amanda scolded me from the backseat for slowing the trip, but the more we chatted, the more confident I became in my Hassaniya. It felt good to be understood.

The town seemed shaped by tourists' imaginings. Signs above the dune where our driver had buried our car advertised *Hotel One Thousand and One Nights* and *Hotel Fort Saganne*, a movie about the French-Algerian war, which was filmed nearby. We hoped to ride camels into the desert or rather the women did. The Sahara air pushed our human air through the passenger door. Kathy and Amanda crawled out of the car under the empty sky. They stretched. I met Mohammed at the trunk for our bags. Sweat streaked his face and his graphite stubble. He asked if I was sure that we wanted to walk, pointing at the steep dune ahead of us. I told him the car wouldn't make it. *Perhaps the women want a donkey cart*, he suggested. I assured him that they were strong.

Jess stepped out the car, and sand spilled over her sandals. She winced and reached to brace herself against the hood. When she touched the black paint, she shrieked. *God you can't touch anything in this country!* Amanda and I smiled at each other. We appreciated that she appreciated our struggle with living in Mauritania. We'd lived here a year and yet to be successful at it. Mohammed and I dumped the baggage on the sand and started digging out the front tires. When they appeared free, I buried my hands in my sleeves and pushed from the rear while he revved the engine. Exhaust billowed through my toes, and sand sprayed my shins. Passers-by joined and more arrived after we had given up.

Mohammed and the new arrivals searched the ground for trash to shove under the tires for traction. Artifacts of daily life piled up. Tea boxes, kindling, plastic oil quarts, cigarette cartons, twine rope, a goat femur, an orphaned flip-flop. I thought that when the Sahara eventually covered Chinguitti, these were the relics that would rise like seashells as evidence that people had lived and survived here.

Again we pushed. I mumbled to Amanda that I'd seen this before and that it wasn't going to work. As Mohammed pressed the accelerator trash glanced off my shins. The tires interred the rest of it and a search for more trash started. *How long is this going to take?* Jess asked. *Should we help them?* I was reluctant to interfere because sometimes help slowed progress, but she was right. This needed to happen more quickly so that we could find some shade. *I think I know what to do*, I mumbled in case I failed. I opened the driver's side door and removed the floor mat. *Mohammed!* I held it up for him to see. *Let's try this.* He shrugged. He needed convincing. *I've seen it work before*, I lied. After placing mats under the tires, he sped the car back toward the new town and shallower sand and stopped. The passers-by cheered a little. He motioned for us to get back in the car, and then pointed toward the old town. I waved

off the idea. The sand would only deepen. We waved goodbye, we collected our bags, and trudged through the sand.

None of us had actually seen Sam's house. Before we left Atar, he handed me the key and confessed that he couldn't join us until maybe our last night in Chinguetti. *Just walk into the old town and ask where I live.* I smiled at his directions mostly because I knew they would work even though they shouldn't. The sun peacocked as we crossed the wadi and started up the dune. The old town was a blur of split-stone walls. Stones stacked upon stones, each a different color of wind-burnt cheeks. Jess pointed above the buildings towards the horizon. *What are those?* White balls rose on stanchions from the Friday Mosque's minaret. I answered, *They're supposed to be ostrich-egg shells. I think five of them.* Kathy added, *It was built in the thirteenth or fourteenth century.* She adjusted her mulafa that hung as if to fall although she moved remarkably well for having so little practice. She'd spent a semester in Niger as an undergraduate and thought herself a desert child. *I did my homework before I left,* she smirked at Jess who wrinkled her nose. Kathy's round face and dusty blond hair fit well under her head wrap. She seemed more comfortable with facts than people after spending most of the car ride reading a copy of *The Book of Common Prayer* that she had stolen from the Peace Corps Bureau's bathroom. Kathy regurgitated more of what she'd read somewhere. *Chinguetti's the seventh holiest city in Islam. It prospered during the height of trans-Saharan trade as an important stop on the salt-gold route, and became the West African hub for the hajj. One time,* Kathy paused, *52,000 camels set out from here for Mecca.* I tried and failed to imagine camels filling the empty wadi we'd just crossed. *When the hajjis returned, they brought important Islamic manuscripts with them, and it became a famous center for Islamic study.* She exaggerated her smile. We didn't ask any more questions.

The dune steepened. We breathed heavily as we walked two steps for one. Amanda lost a flip-flop in the sand and hopped on one foot to retrieve it. Kathy murmured, *Maybe we should have taken the car.* I smiled and said, *I thought you liked the desert.* She stuck her tongue out at me. *I like the desert on a camel,* she qualified. *When it does all the work.* Deeper into the old town, walled compounds divided the dune into serpentine corridors. Their sky-blue doors and shutters were closed. Most people were likely hibernating under patches of shade until the Ramadan sun set, and they could eat and drink again. A miasma of roasting fecal matter leaked from crumbling latrine walls. Sand was accumulating on the rubble.

Unsure where to knock, we knocked on doors that no one answered. Most appeared vacant, probably owned by Nouakchott patrons. The women went for water, and I failed to find someone to give us directions. Finally, Kathy said, *Just give me the key.* She climbed stairs and tried locks until one sprung. Jess cheered quietly. *Good job, Kathy!* The door opened to a courtyard textured by raised garden plots, wilted corn stalks, and fuzzy sprouts. We had promised Sam that we would water them, but we weren't sure it would help. Sam said that there were three rooms; two of them were used for storage. We found his because of a combination lock hanging from the door. *The combination's easy,* he insisted. *It's drink-Jesus-drink.* Our eyes rose. *You know 21-03-21. But the doors . . . well, you'll see.*

Amanda giggled again at Sam's joke as she worked the lock. She pulled at the French doors. *Watch out!* she yelled as one fell into her and crashed onto the patio. The other swung out on one strained hinge. I removed it and rested it against the wall. The air in the room was stale, remaining it seemed from the last time Sam breathed it. The women disappeared into the darkness. When I joined them, they had collapsed onto matellas. We didn't discuss what was next. We just rested. Amanda and I read novels. Kathy read *The Book of Common Prayer*.

After only a few minutes Jess turned away from her *People* magazine. *I am so wet. I'm not even moving and I'm sweating. I'll need to change clothes before we look for a camel guide.* She wiped her head with her sleeve. *We have it so much easier in Benin; I don't know how you survive here.* Amanda turned to Kathy. *How long are you staying in Mauritania?* Our trip had developed so quickly we had forgotten to ask. She answered without looking up, *Benin's hot too. Maybe not quite this hot.* We all waited for her to finish her response, but apparently she had. Jess finished it for her. *We need to leave for Cape Verde in three days if Cheikh Gueye can get our replacement visas.* Before we returned to our reading, Jess whispered to me: *Kathy's not usually like this.* I too felt different—more confident—since I had managed to get us to Chinguetti. But none of us were aware of how the Sahara changed people.

* * * *

At seven o'clock their first morning in Mauritania, Jess and Kathy were walking from their hotel to a main road to catch a taxi for Chinguetti when a white Moor in a blue dara'a shoved them onto the gravel and stole their backpacks. Amanda and I first met them slouching in chairs outside the volunteer secretary's, Cheikh Gueye's, office waiting to learn when they could leave. Their faces were puffy and absent. We had heard about the mugging, so I offered my condolences. *God,* Jess said quietly. *I guess everyone knows.* I retreated quickly. *I'm sorry . . . Another volunteer mentioned it. I assumed since I hadn't seen you before . . . My name is Jeremy.* She smiled. *No, that's alright. I'm Jess. This is Kathy. We're just waiting to see what Cheikh Gueye can do for us, and then were going to Chinguetti.* I hesitated, unsure if she wanted to continue the conversation. *Yeah, Amanda and I are trying to get to Morocco for a couple weeks.* She nodded, *That sounds fun. Good luck on your trip. I hope it goes better than ours anyway.*

Amanda and I walked into Cheikh Gueye's office. Our schools were on vacation, we had finished a year in the country, and we both needed to escape. Morocco promised a true vacation—the Mediterranean, the Atlas Mountains, and cedar forests. We had planned the trip the last time we saw each other on the dance floor of the *Iguana* on New Year's Eve in St. Louis, Senegal, though we only knew each other by proximity. We'd spent a lot of time in the same classroom, training as teachers, listening to each other answer questions, and watching each other listening, but we hadn't spent much time alone. Her face was soft and delicate. Her hair was cropped at the ears. She walked as if she would escape her body. Mostly I liked that she said what she thought and never seemed comfortable around people because of what she might say. But at midnight we kissed in the club like everyone else. That was the one time we touched. Or that's how I want to remember it. Maybe I kissed someone else.

Cheikh Gueye would tell us if our plans were hopeless. When we arrived in Nouakchott, we were unprepared. We hadn't purchased plane tickets, and we had learned that we needed to renew our Mauritanian visas. It was Thursday, and the Mauritanian bureaucracy was slow. After we stepped out of the office, Amanda returned to her hotel room. Jess and Kathy were still sitting there. Jess followed me to the computer lab to check email. I opened the door for her, and she smiled generously. As I followed her, I noticed her hair settled between her shoulder blades and thought it spun from the darkness of a cave. Frigid air and the hum of the air conditioner rushed through the open door. We chose computers next to each other and fingered the keyboards like five-legged spiders. Her almond-shaped eyes shifted between me and her monitor. *What did Cheikh Gueye say?* I scanned my new messages, and responded, *He actually didn't have any answers. Our trip is not looking good.* She frowned. *I'm sorry.* She typed as she talked. *You and Amanda should come to Chinguetti with us. I mean if we aren't imposing*

on anything. I balked at the idea. I had been through Chinguetti once before and hadn't planned to return because it felt like a tourist trap. *No, you wouldn't be. We're just friends.* Jess smirked at the word's ambiguity. *I don't know,* I continued. *I think our backup plan was to ride the train from Choum to Nouadhibou.* She nodded, *What's the train?* I did my best to sell her in hope that they would come along. *It's the longest in the world. Two-miles from engine to caboose if it has one. Passengers ride on top of the cars in the open air through heart of the Sahara along the border between Mauritania and Western Sahara to the Atlantic. Nouadhibou's like the Amsterdam of Mauritania. There are real restaurants, beer, cool weather, and swimming! You should come with us.* Jess smirked at my enthusiasm. *That sounds nice, but we don't have enough time.* She frowned. *I think we're leaving for Chinguetti this evening. Maybe we'll meet somewhere in the middle.* She tried to sound perky. I frowned. As much as I would have enjoyed their company, I knew that wouldn't happen. Life had never worked out like that for me. Later I realized that I had to allow it to.

When we finished checking email, we enjoyed the air conditioning. Jess told me the story of their morning mugging. Her voice was indifferent as if she were recalling a dull plotline. *I'm fine,* she said, *but Kathy, she's a bit traumatized. I think it's because when the man knocked us down, I landed on my stomach, so I didn't see him except as a blur as if he were a ghost or something. But Kathy was spun around somehow so that she landed on her back. She saw the mugger's face. He threatened her with a homemade knife before he ripped our packs from us. A car pulled up beside us. I started shivering. I tried to remember the last time I shivered. I thought it was going to help, but the mugger tossed the packs in the car and jumped in as it sped off. Neither of us was hurt, but Kathy lost everything. I had already shipped most of my things to California.* She paused for a moment and glanced at the keyboard. *Last night,*

Kathy balled up on the comforter and didn't talk. She was scared to leave the room and had nightmares about white Moors. She blames herself since she wanted to visit the desert. Everyone's been so nice, but she's just not the same now. I don't know how we'll manage travelling, but we are here so that's what we'll do. My bones were cold. I could hardly follow her voice, but I didn't want her to stop. Her mouth was most beautiful when moving. Then she stopped. *I better go back down. I don't want to leave Kathy by herself for too long.* I held the door for her, we thawed together in the afternoon heat, and said goodbye.

I was surprised when Cheikh Gueye called me in the early evening and asked if Amanda and I would travel with Jess and Kathy to Chinguetti the next day. He said that they didn't know he was calling, but that they were afraid to travel by themselves. I wondered why I had not agreed to travel with them in the first place. I said that it was no problem, but when I hung up, I remembered one. I remembered that five-year-old Mauritians spoke better Hassaniya than I did; that even though I studied many words, they fell from my mouth in gooey clumps; that my voice often lost strength mid-sentence as I lost confidence in what I was saying. My Mauritanian friends derided my efforts. For stretches I didn't want to speak any language. They suggested that I try French, which was to suggest I remain alien. Moor language was inseparable from Moor culture, so deeply embedded that a friend once told me that Arabs used to fight wars with poetry rather than swords. France was the colonizer. To choose one was a choice of identity. I was supposed to be an educated teacher, but I spoke no language people understood. Northern Mauritania was a Moor stronghold, few spoke French. I would be the only Hassaniya speaker. Jess, Kathy, and Amanda would depend on me. They would expect me to succeed where I'd so often failed. I felt weaponless.

* * * *

I had nearly fallen asleep when Kathy announced from behind *The Book of Common Prayer*: *I'm hungry. Maybe we should find a restaurant before we search for a camel guide.* She lowered the book. *Where's the laterine? I've got to pee.* I pointed around the corner, and she walked out the door. Jess and Amanda started changing clothes, and then Jess remembered I was in the room. *Jeremy, would you mind turning . . . Well I guess it doesn't matter. We're all volunteers; we're used to it, right?* I blushed in the dark. *No, that's alright. I'll fix the door. We'll have to shut them when we leave.* I walked to the doorway and *You're sweet* followed me across the threshold. Once I fixed the doors, we left.

Outside the compound, sunlight hid the town in a furnace glow. Through the maze of houses, we found a restaurant in a multistory building of glass windows and clean paint and a man sleeping on the floor. His cheeks were sunken and his jaw chiseled. He appeared forty, but Moors often looked older than their age. His black hair rested on a bunched indigo hawli. The color was famous in West Africa. It represented the desert Imazighen, often called Swahiri, an ethnic group of clans that united once to rule Spain and North Africa south to the Senegal River, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Western history retells the period as the Islamic plague that threatened Christian Europe, but regional historians remember it, Andalusia, as an Islamic utopia, a place where Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived side-by-side in peace. Eventually, they fell to Arab invaders sweeping across the Sahara after which some Imazighen retreated to the hinterlands while others mixed with their conquerors. This latter group call themselves Beydan, or white Moors, and tends to associate with their Arab roots rather than their African ones. When Kathy saw the man's face, she startled. Jess whispered, *He looks like her attacker.*

The man, Ahmed, led us to a sanitized room. Toothy-white tiles covered the walls. A sink and a vanity shelf without a mirror stood against the back one. A towel rod hung adjacent.

It used to be a library. My parents are trying to convert the upstairs in to a hotel. I'm managing it for them, Ahmed said in French. I had seen a sign for the Maison d'Livres, the national library system, when we entered. *Why are you changing it?* I asked. He shrugged, *Few people read in Chinguetti anymore.* He seemed like he didn't want to discuss it. *What would you like to eat?* We stared at him for a moment, waiting for more details. Finally Amanda asked, *What do you have?* He stood with his hands crossed in front of his legs. *We only have rice and meat. It's Ramadan, so there's not much in the market.* We didn't mind. When he left, Kathy whispered, *I can't believe we're eating in a bathroom. This is great!* Her enthusiasm startled me. She tiptoed to the sink and turned the faucet slowly to disappointment. Then she heard Ahmed's sandals and raced to her spot on the red carpet.

He entered the room with four Fantas and a photo album. After handing us the drinks, he opened it to similar pictures of himself standing with grinning tourists in wide-brim hats next to scowling camels. He started explaining as if reading a tourist brochure: *Chinguetti is Mauritania's largest tourist destination. We get many, many people every year. They come to ride camels and see the desert . . .* Then he narrated the pictures: *These people are French. This one, he is German. I took him and his wife all the way to Tidjikja. Three days in the desert . . . it was difficult for them.* There was a picture of tourists gathered around Ahmed under a nomad tent while he stirred a pot of something with a spoon. *Here they are spending the night. This is best because you really get the desert experience. At night the stars are the most beautiful in the world. If you want I can take you too.* Kathy's excitement burst into verbiage. *That sounds so wonderful! Sleeping under the stars. We should spend the night in the desert!* Ahmed frowned at her English. On the next page, there was a woman dressed in shorts and a tube top. He pointed to her, *Some tourists, they are not like you. They don't know how to dress*

when they come to Mauritania. They don't know that this is offensive to us. We were well aware of this, but I wondered why he kept the picture.

At the end of the album, he removed folded letters from a plastic sleeve. He handed them to Jess and told her to read them aloud. As she read the first one, Ahmed nodded teacherly, as if he expected her to leave something out. When she finished, he encouraged her to read the next. They all extolled Ahmed's skills as a guide and his desert knowledge. He interrupted her and pointed toward the ceiling for emphasis. *There are 182 qualities of sand.* Amanda and I smirked at Ahmed's self-promotion. I encouraged him, *How do you know so much about sand?* His voice thickened as he assumed a regal tone. *We know the desert like ship captains know the ocean. Sand directs us to oases. It tells us where to find food for our animals. It even helps us predict the weather. Where you see death, we see life.* I cringed at the saccharin maxim. He paused for a moment. *And I was a geology teacher.* We laughed. *It's not a joke,* he insisted. *Everything I said was true.*

Ahmed left to check on lunch. Jess and Kathy grinned at having met their first real Mauritanian. *He's so dignified,* Jess said. *And cute,* Kathy added. I rolled my eyes. I thought that living in Benin would have taught them not to romanticize local Africans. Ahmed wasn't even a desert nomad but a forty-year-old failed teacher living off of his parents. They stopped discussing Ahmed when a woman flip-flopped into the room with a wash basin. The thongs of her sandals had broken and were sewn back together with white string. Dry skin dusted her black ankles. She set down the basin and returned with a platter of sticky rice and meat chunks. I wondered if she were a slave.

The North was notorious for slavery. Officially it had been outlawed numerous times, but I had heard on the BBC a few months earlier that a larger percentage of the country is

enslaved than any other. The system was so endemic that as much as two-thirds of the population is a current or former slave, called haratines or black Moors. When the Arabs descended from the North, they conquered and enslaved much of the black African population living in the Sahel. Most men managed date palmeries or grazed camels or cows. Women worked as house slaves and concubines and never left the house or tent alone. After generations of slavery, many absorbed into the Moor culture. Even after their emancipation, many still lived without any knowledge of it because the government didn't require their masters to tell them, others remained because they had been taught it was their Islamic duty, and more because their enslavers were all they knew of family. During my first year, I had tried to identify slaves around Kankossa, but it was impossible to tell whether they were paid or not. They likely wouldn't tell me. Even if they did, what could I do? So, after washing our hands, we circled the platter and swallowed mouthfuls of rice and meat without tasting them until our nails scraped the bottom of the metal platter.

Jess was washing the stickiness from her hands when she asked, *So, are we going to hire Ahmed?* Kathy and Amanda waited for the other to answer. *Jeremy, are you coming with us?* I shook my head with my mouth full of rice. *Come on, we need you to protect us.* I swallowed and replied, *I rode a camel in a zoo once, and that was enough. Why would you need me anyway? You have Ahmed.* She frowned. *It's not the same.* Her eyes were convincing. I blushed again. Amanda interrupted my moment. *Do you think we should look for other guides to make sure he's not ripping us off?* Kathy didn't think so. Amanda persisted, *But we don't know what the correct price should be.* Secretly I sided with Amanda. If they spent all day with Ahmed, I would fade away just as I was enjoying the attention. Jess agreed with Kathy. *I don't mind paying more. He speaks French and doesn't creep me out. Plus, we haven't found another*

guide. Amanda's brow furrowed. But we haven't looked. Kathy shot back, *Alright, it's getting late. If we're going to look for another guide, we should leave now.* Suddenly my opinion changed when I realized that I would have to do most of the talking. Amanda seemed to dread the idea too and quietly agreed to Ahmed.

The woman returned for the plate. Ahmed followed, and I started negotiating prices in Hassaniya, but he insisted on French so that the women could understand. They decided that spending the night would cost too much. Instead, he explained that he could take them to an oasis outside of town that his relatives owned where they would spend the afternoon and swim in a pool. *What?* I asked. He explained, *Well, it's like a swimming pool. You can swim in it if you want.* Our faces apparently showed our disbelief. *You'll see when we get there. So are all of you coming?* The women looked at me. *Yes,* I said. *We're all coming.* I decided that the alternative was wallowing in paranoia about how one or all of them would return in love with Ahmed, and about how nothing ever worked out for me. Jess and Kathy silently clapped. Ahmed asked us if we needed anything. I mentioned that I had forgotten my hawli, so he sold me his. He bragged that his mother made it. I thought the colors were beautiful.

As we left, he grabbed my elbow and whispered in Hassaniya, *Which one is yours?* I gave him a confused look. He pointed at the women who were walking ahead of us. *Which one?* I asked. Then I grinned. *All of them . . . No, that's not true. None of them are mine. I don't own women.* He looked surprised. *Really? You're travelling with three women and none of them are yours?* I shook my head. I appeared deep in thought, and then his expression fell. *Make sure you tell them that we will have to walk the camels sometimes because some dunes are too steep for inexperienced riders. Sometimes it can be difficult for people.* I promised that I would.

In the morning, I met Jess's eyes, peeking from her heavy blanket, moist with dew. She waved sleepily from across the porch. I waved back and shyly ducked under my blanket, and pulled my legs to my chest, which sucked in brisk air into the warmth. The heat had radiated out of the desert overnight, and I wished that I had it back. Kathy and Amanda were still sleeping between us. I decided to fetch breakfast.

When I returned, Jess pointed toward Kathy who was still sleeping. *I can't wake her up.* I smirked and asked, *You've checked to see if she still alive?* Jess slapped me across the chest. *Yes, she's still alive. Poor thing. She's been so stressed out. She probably needs the sleep.* I handed Amanda the bread and honey that I'd purchased. She asked, *Don't we have to leave soon?* I checked my phone. *Fifteen minutes. I guess I'll wake her.* I kneeled over her and called her name. I nudged her shoulder. Finally, I shook my keys above her head. She startled awake and blindly slapped the keys from my hand into the sandy courtyard. She covered her eyes with her hands. *I'm so sorry. I didn't know it was you.* I felt awful. I hadn't thought it through. *No, that was my fault. I just couldn't wake you any other way. We have to meet Ahmed soon.* She returned to her pillow and covered her head with her blanket. *Ok. Just five more minutes.*

We were ten minutes late. Ahmed pointed to his wrist as soon as he saw us approaching. He and a camel handler were securing saddles that opened like tulips with four petals onto the four camels crouched in the sand. Ahmed encouraged us to hurry: *We must get to the oasis before it gets hot.* We had all managed to dress ridiculously. I wore pants, a long sleeve shirt, and Ahmed's hawli. Kathy hid under a hooded green raincoat. I asked her if she was preparing for rain. She just mumbled that it was all she had without acknowledging my joke. The camels

chewed invisible toothpicks and each glared at us with one eye that appeared lined with charcoal eyeliner and accentuated with eyelash extensions. Ahmed instructed me to mount. I reached my legs over and straddled the front petal of the saddle. He tugged on the guide rope tied to the camel's nose ring. It extended its hind legs, and I lunged forward, quickly grasping the saddle to avoid tumbling out. Then it extended its front legs, and I jerked backwards until I was sitting straight again. Jess and Amanda mounted. Kathy's refused to move. Ahmed and the camel handler pulled at the rope, but it turned its head and emitted a guttural sound as if it were gargling mucus. While they dealt with Kathy's camel, Jess's started to wander. I shouted to Ahmed. He looked up and fetched her camel by which time Kathy's had stood up. Ahmed then lined them up and tucked each rope into the next saddle. They led the front camel by its rope and the rest followed.

Outside Chinguetti, rocky rust-colored plain replaced dune. I was rocking on the camel as if it were riding a box-store mechanical horse. My perch felt precarious, but it enabled me to see beyond the dunes outside Chinguetti. Pebbles crunched under the camels' feet as we rode towards watery mirages that recalled the desert's history as an ancient seabed. I gripped tighter as we lurched down small dunes. Soon I was tired and sore. The heat engulfed us as if we were swimming in it. I thought that if the experience was at all romantic, the feeling had disappeared with the heat waves. Just as the ride was becoming unbearable, Ahmed offered his desert knowledge: *The Sahara is not what people think*. I smirked cynically. He explained that most of it was not sand but rocky flats and serrated mountains. The romance hadn't worn from Jess and Kathy; they were eager for more. They pointed to the tufts of grass that occasionally added height to the terrain. *This*, he announced, *is camel grass*. They pointed to more vegetation. *That is also camel grass*. They pointed to a shrub on our left. *That is a camel tree*.

In the distance, dunes towered over the plain in their march toward Chinguetti. Soon they would swallow the town as they had others. Desertification is the popular term for this phenomenon, but most of Mauritania is already a desert. Instead, the Sahara is expanding simply because dunes move. A single grain, nudged by the wind, rolls down a dune, gathers momentum and ricochets off other grains, bouncing into the air as if from a trampoline, where the wind catches it and holds it for a moment. When it lands on the same dune or another, it transfers its energy and splashes a coronet of grains airborne. With a strong wind, a single grain can travel fifteen to twenty feet with one bounce. Soon grains are splashing everywhere in a haze that expands over the surface of the desert, covering places where it wasn't, enabling more sand to join and press farther. In a few weeks, an entire dune can move noticeably, and when one encroaches upon a town, there is nothing for the people to do but leave.¹ In Tidjikja, Amanda's city, sand piles in drifts next to the school's walls so that they are no longer walls but ramps for curious goats. The caretakers shovel it daily so that students and teachers can enter the classrooms. In Chinguetti, city workers water the sand during tourist season to prevent it from blowing, but a few residents have had to abandon their compounds to the sand. In northern Mauritania, civilization is losing.

An hour into the trip, Kathy's camel pissed on its tail and flung it onto my face. It smelled like new tires. The saddle was scaling my thighs. My camel sweated and frothed and smelled like warm sour milk. The reg radiated heat like an electric grill. Jess was insisting to Ahmed that everything could not be camel grass, and Amanda laughed at me, *Did that camel just pee on you?* I groaned and complained, *Camels are disgusting. What's that black stuff oozing*

¹ De Villiers, Marq and Sheila Hirtle. *Sahara: The Extraordinary History of the World's Largest Desert*. New York: Walker and Company, 2002. 67-68.

from behind its ears? It looks like tobacco juice. I waved at Ahmed who drifted back to my camel, and I pointed it out. He tried to withhold his grin and whispered a word in Hassaniya that I didn't understand. He tried again. *It means he's looking for a woman.* He glanced at the women and said, *You can tell them if you want.* But I didn't have a choice. Immediately, Amanda asked what he said. I told her, and she giggled. *That's kind of gross. Do you think he's serious?* I repeated it for Kathy and Jess who were also asking. Kathy commented, *I wish it were that easy to tell when men were horny!* Jess turned around and said, *But they are always horny. You just have to assume it.* I smiled, and Ahmed looked at me for explanation. *They said men are always looking for women.* His stained teeth filled his crescent smile. *It's true,* he said. He motioned for me to lean towards him. *You know that rich older women come from Europe and pay young Mauritanian men to sleep with them.* My eyes widened. *Sometimes, he continued, they take the men back to Europe.* I nodded. I didn't know what to say. No one asked me to translate, so I kept this desert knowledge to myself.

Ahmed led us through the slack between the dunes, and we gained elevation until we straddled a ridge that opened onto El Djouf, the Mauritanian Sahara that extended into Mali and Algeria. The saddles and the heat stifled conversation. We were afraid to lose what saliva still coated our throats. I stared into the sand; there was little else. Once my eyes adjusted to the boredom, the dunes separated into waves and corrugations. Ridges joined in star and pyramid shapes. Patches of turquoise, rust, black, and pearl emerged out of the tawny monotone. I asked Ahmed what the different types were. He replied, *The colors come from different minerals.* I thought I had misspoken. *What are the names?* He looked again where I was pointing below a slip-face. *They all have different names. There are one hundred and eighty-two varieties of sand—too many to know all of their names.* I frowned, but we soon passed a goat's chalky

ribcage jutting out of the sand. In the desert, goat remains were human artifacts and suggested we were nearing the oasis.

Soon we reached a steep face that dropped into a wadi that cut through the erg, or sand field. Ahmed stopped the camels and said we had to dismount. Once I regained my legs, I felt that I'd stood there before. It was exactly like a river valley in Missouri without sycamores and the hush of water. I'd read once about the green Sahara and how only nine thousand years ago rains filled wadis and lakes; ergs were savannas; hardwood forests grew in patches below mountain ranges; animals grazed and people fished and made clay pots. There was once life in this place where I saw death, but that wasn't what Ahmed meant. He saw life in this dry river bed, in this unstable ground, in this naked landscape that I thought so inhospitable.

Once we bound down the face, the oasis rose like a verdant blossom from the dry river bed. Straw tegits laid in varying degrees of burial. Some leaned nearly intact, others had folded in the wind, a few were only thatching, and the rest were twigs poking through the sand. *Do people live in those?* Jess asked. I shrugged. *Probably not anymore.* Beyond the tegits, I could separate individual date palms. A gas-powered water pump rested nearby inside a chain-linked fence that enclosed a garden, cement wells, and basins. The handler took our camels, and we followed Ahmed into the canopy.

A path wound between tangled underbrush and saw-tooth trunks that burst into balls of spikey leaves until we reached a plastic mat striped in old gold and royal blue. Ahmed told us to relax, so we did. Strained sunlight projected claw marks on the mat. I unwrapped my hawli, and my head radiated heat. A shriveled woman appeared out of the underbrush and greeted us timidly. She spread silver mixing bowls on the mat and scattered plastic bags of ingredients. The air smelled of water. I leaned on a pillow Ahmed had tossed towards to me. The woman

poured water from a dirty yellow jug. Kathy and Jess watched her closely. *What's she making?* Jess asked. Amanda answered, *She's making zrig. It tastes kind of like milk at the bottom of a cereal bowl.* She added camel's milk and sugar to the water and whisked the mixture. Metal susurrated against metal. Her fist that balled over the handle was wrinkled and dark like a dried date. Ahmed removed lunch ingredients and pushed them toward the woman. Kathy slipped behind *The Book of Common Prayer*. Jess whispered to me, *Why is she always reading that?* *She's not religious.* I didn't have an answer for her.

The woman handed Ahmed the bowl of zrig. He drank deeply and passed it to Kathy. A cropped old man emerged from the same underbrush as the woman. He walked as if his hips were the only joints in his legs. A few graveboard teeth interrupted his gummy smile. He shook Ahmed's hand and then mine with both of his. His clothes seemed to hang from a rope. Amanda passed the bowl to me. The sugary milk cooled down to my chest, and I passed the bowl to the old man who gulped audibly. When he finished, he asked Ahmed where we were from. Ahmed suggested, *Ask him. He speaks Hassaniya.* My confidence strengthened my voice. I welcome the pressure to validate Ahmed's claim. He looked at me with skepticism. *You speak Hassaniya?* I nodded. *Really? Say something.* I explained that we were Americans and that Amanda and I taught English. More questions followed in raspy bursts, as if the gaps where his teeth were allowed trapped words to escape, and then thoughtful pauses.

When he paused, I asked my own questions. His answers were old-timey: *I've lived here for twenty-eight years. I take care of the place. Rarely leave it. Most of these trees are owned by my patron in town. Each tree is very, very expensive. Maybe seventy-five thousand Ouguiya.* The man spoke with a subtle pride in the wealth of his master. Seventy-five thousand Ouguiya amounted to about three hundred dollars, and there were hundreds of trees in the palmery.

Although this was probably not his master's primary income, the palms alone made him wealthy in a country where people lived off of two dollars a day. The man's eyes darted across the oasis as if he were listing tasks that he had to finish. Then he left on his peg legs without a word. I forgot to ask him if he was paid for his work.

After lunch, we escaped the Sahara for a while. The women slept and I read a book. Flies streaked over our heads as if in transit on an invisible highway. Ants tickled my arm where I had rolled the sleeve that braced my head against the mat. Three teenage boys frolicked down the path in Hawaiian beach shorts and Nike slip-ons. Towels draped their necks, and their pink, owl-eyed sunglasses mirrored the shape of their bellies. I held back laughter at how out of place they looked. They greeted Ahmed excitedly, talking with their hands and hips in circular motions, informing him that they were on holiday from university. They left as suddenly as they came on another path towards the garden and giggled over the clamor of the palm leaves in the wind. Ahmed explained that one of their fathers was his uncle and owned the palmery. The growl of a motor pump emerged from the garden. *Do you want to go swimming?* Ahmed asked. *I mean there is no water above ground, but there is a swimming pool. You and the women can just take off your clothes off and swim. It's no problem.* Considering how he chided the woman in his photo album for her inappropriate dress, I wondered about his intentions.

Shortly sounds of play joined the rumble of the water pump. *Who's making all of that noise?* Amanda asked through one awake eye. She sat up and stretched as I told her about the boys. She yawned, *That's so weird.* Ahmed interrupted us, *Do you want to swim in the pool? This is your last chance. We'll have to leave soon. You can just leave your clothes here.* He was disappointed when she declined. Instead, Amanda and I decided to find this pool while Jess

and Kathy were still asleep. We followed the path through palm sprigs and chest-high grass. When we finally emerged, a pipe led from a well to a deep basin where slicing hands were arching glittering wings into bare chests. Arms grappled with bodies and sloshed white froth over the rim. Butt cheeks flashed in the sunlight. We stopped and stared as if we'd caught our parents having sex. I realized that I was grossly wrong about Mauritians and nudity. Or perhaps men could be naked around each other. I'd never been told anything about homoerotic nude swimming pools in training. We waited for the other to say something as if silence would erase the reality. Finally, Amanda muttered, *Umm . . . I think we should leave.*

When we strolled into the clearing Ahmed was waiting and Kathy and Jess were gathering their things. I wrapped my hawli, and we found the camels that were grazing on low-hanging palm fronds. The women walked ahead while Ahmed led the camels and I walked to the side. Kathy turned to me, her mouth crooked and eyes flashing, *You know, you and Ahmed could be brothers. You're both tall; you have beards; your faces are thin. You're the same but different as if you have the same mother but different fathers or something.* The women laughed, and then laughed some more when they realized that the comparison irritated me.

Jess changed the subject. *So, what was the pool like? Did you go swimming?* I was eager to entertain her. While I was relating what Amanda and I saw, Ahmed snuck up behind Jess and attempted to attach the camels' lead rope to the tail of her head scarf. This won't end well, I thought. When I told the part about the buttcheeks, Jess's eyes widened, *You're kidding, right?*

She was about to say something else when Ahmed succeeded in securing the rope. The headscarf slowly stretched back so that the camels fell in line with her. Ahmed and the handler burst out laughing as the rope's weight pulled the scarf from her head. *What the hell?* She

turned around furious. Ahmed smiled as if he'd just kicked the girl he liked on the playground. Jess sucked her teeth, but continued walking. Still Ahmed persisted. *So, Jess*, he began. I could see her nostrils flare. *You're Chinese, right?* Mohammed our cab driver had made the same mistake, but again, I just watched. *No, I'm American!* Ahmed appeared confused by her response. *How could you be American? You look Chinese?* I tried to help the situation. *Her parents live in America, and her grandparents are Korean.* Jess quickened her pace, but Ahmed matched it. *Korean and Chinese, they're the same thing.* She stopped abruptly and turned. She was furious. *No, they're not! Stop talking about it!* Her irritation amused him. He thought it was a joke. *But your eyes, they do this.* He used his fingers to stretch the corner of his eyes. Jess snarled. She filled his ears with French that I couldn't understand, but I enjoyed every word.

When we finally reached the dune, the women paused, expecting to mount the camels, but Ahmed and the handler trudged on with them in tow. Jess and Amanda struggled in the sand as it escaped the push of their feet. They breathed harder as their faces reddened. I caught up with Ahmed, and Kathy was close behind. Amanda yelled between breaths, *I thought we were supposed to ride the camels.* Jess began yelling at Ahmed in French. He tried to explain that the face was too steep; that the camels could fall over on them. They weren't listening. The heat rang in my ears. Sweat stung my eyes and tasted like the ocean. *Tell them!* Ahmed pled with me. I tried to explain what he was saying to Jess and Amanda, but their anger was self-sustaining. As we crested the dune, I felt satisfied. I didn't create the situation, but the outcome was certainly of my making. Jess and Amanda were in mutiny. I read in Ahmed's eyes that this had happened before; that he expected this from western women. He was no longer competition. Finally, Ahmed turned to me and said, *I told you that we would have to walk. Didn't you tell*

them? Jess and Amanda quieted as they caught their breath. I stared out over El Djouf and wondered again if I could survive it. I thought about the trip, where I started and where I would end, and I decided that I could. I didn't have to see life; I just had to live. Then I grinned at him, flashed my eyes, and said, *I guess I forgot.*

* * * *

Dust slid in feathers down the windshield as the pickup stopped in Choum on a road hemmed by two-toned, white and turquoise, shoe-box stores. Ornaments of barter cluttered the store fronts—folded lengths of deformed rebar, piles of used tires, stacks of lumber, walls of cinder blocks, pallets of rice, and tables of vegetables and motley Chinese-made trinkets. Merchants courted the shade in plastic chairs, chewing sticks or smoking one-hit tobacco pipes, waiting for the train.

I nudged Amanda to wake her, eager for relief from my seat in the middle of a truck cab, which had no middle seat. I had been sitting split between the armrest and the passenger seat so that I had to prop myself against the dashboard to avoid collapsing into Amanda. Despite my efforts we had been mashed together without air conditioning or ventilation for three hours, sharing all messiness of sex without any of the fun. She had fallen asleep, feeling ill, in the jagged mountain pass outside Atar and remained so over the salt flats where we raced sand-capped and sunburnt mountains all the way to Choum. Before she was fully aware of the situation, I opened the door and helped her out. Dry air cleared the cab of the rotten breath and sweat that we had been exhaling and secreting and rebreathing throughout the trip. The passengers riding on the mound of cargo in the bed had already dismounted, and the driver was unhooking the rope net securing it. He handed luggage and goods to extended hands, and the mound gradually diminished to where I could see our backpacks. Unwilling to wait, I tugged on whatever straps I could to free them from below. Then, we beat off the dust and started searching for a restaurant where we too could wait for the train.

Choum existed before the railroad, but now the town lives for it. Not only is the train the longest in the world—two point three kilometers—it is also the heaviest. It transports iron ore through some of

Mauritania's most remote territory from the mining town, Zouerat, along the landmined border with Western Sahara, to Nouadhibou, six hundred and seventy-five kilometers away. One person that I talked with derided the line of rail running through town as a "monument to European stupidity in Africa." In 1960s, when the French were building it to exploit Mauritania's iron-ore wealth, they realized that there was a mountain in their way, so they attempted to broker a deal with the Spanish to divert the line a few kilometers into the flat Spanish Sahara, now called Western Sahara. The Spanish agreed, but imposed conditions that the French couldn't agree to. Instead, they tunneled through two kilometers of solid granite in order to stay within French territory. Only a few years after the French completed the tunnel, the Spanish withdrew from the territory, briefly leaving it to Mauritania, which rendered the tunnel unnecessary.

As we walked from the truck, eyes crawled over our bodies. I hid behind my sunglasses. In Mauritania we had always dealt with fondling eyes, but the cement buildings surrounding us offered no escape. Our pace increased. We had located a restaurant a few hundred meters off. Children barked demands from store fronts: *Donne-moi, cadeau!* My muscles tightened as voices drew closer. Children alighted on either side of us with their hands extended. I charged forward ignoring them. Amanda lashed sharp commands. Every volunteer had learned defense mechanisms for predatory children, they rarely worked. More peeled from store fronts for feeding time. Tormenting the nasrani was always a fun game. Their voices matched cadence and merged into a rally chant, but abruptly stopped when we slipped into the restaurant breezeway. I breathed deliberately and slowly. They were only children.

Earlier that morning we had said goodbye to Jess and Kathy. Amanda hugged them, and I shook their hands in front of their car at the taxi garage. *I wish you all could travel with us to Nouadhibou*, I mumbled. Jess smiled, *I wish we could too. We'll write though.* Kathy added, *Maybe we'll see you in the US sometime, or you could come visit me in Benin!* We stood silently for a moment before Amanda and I decided that we needed to prepare to leave for Choum that afternoon. As we left them at the garage, I thought of something Yahya had told me: *You shouldn't think too much; it will make you sad.* I smiled

to myself and thought that I only remembered advice after the fact. Amanda and I walked toward the market, but I was stuck in yesterday. After Chinguetti, we spent a day swimming at Tergit, a popular oasis outside of Atar, where date palms poked through a rocky cleft like grass from a sidewalk and a man-made dam trapped enough spring water to sit in. We were alone except for the swarming flies to eat *Laughing Cow* cheese and bread and to swim. After lunch, I needed to sleep. I was tired and irritable, no fun for anyone. I pinned my hawli to the ground with my heels and stretched it over my head like a mummy. The layer deterred flies from roaming my face and lapping moisture from my eyes and lips. The Sahara bred desperate flies.

When I awoke, the women were swimming. I walked to them. I splashed against the current as it braided over glittering sand. I passed a bluff draped in airy ferns and spidery vines and pushed my way through sharp undergrowth to the dam. In the sandy pool the women soaked reverently in their underwear below a sulfur-caked bluff and dead palm leaves. *Jeremy! You're awake!* Kathy squealed. She had recovered herself that final night in Chinguetti. Jess's head broke the surface, and she wiped the water from her eyes. *Are you going to swim? The water's really nice.* I slipped in next to them. They were having a conversation about how Amanda was overweight in high school and how she would never have worn a bikini then. *That's amazing,* Jess said. *You look great now. You should be proud.* Kathy stood at the back of the pool and started imitating a camel. Without her baggy clothes, I was surprised how tall and sturdy she looked. She folded her arms over her head to create a snout, lurched forward, dipping her head in the water, and gurgled through her mouth and nose. Finally she rocked back on her hamstrings, laughing, and collapsed into the water. Jess and Amanda struggled to catch their breath. I smiled through my soggy eyes. I was happy to see that she was having fun; that her mugger hadn't ruined her entire vacation.

Wrapped in towels, we returned to our lunch spot. Jess walked next to me. *You know that you saved our trip. We haven't had to worry about anything.* I turned away from her eyes and blushed again. *If you hadn't come along, Kathy would still be scared, and I would be miserable.* I had also never taken compliments well. *It wasn't just me.* Jess's frowned. *C'mon. Give yourself credit. We would have been*

lost without your Hassaniya. You fixed things, and you're smart, funny, and kind. My blood ran thicker. Those were things that I hadn't heard in a year.

Amanda and I were deep into the market before I realized where we were. She asked me, *Where do you want to start?* I tried to orient myself. We were passing through raw foods—mounds of potatoes and onions, a rare pepper, bunches of carrots, and slabs of meat. *Let's look for a dead toubab store and buy long sleeves and pants.* It was second-hand-clothing store that stocked hand-me-downs from the West. The volunteers joked that they were from dead white people. Perhaps they were. The variety of shirts was always entertaining because they advertised things unfamiliar to Mauritania such as *Des Moines Chamber Orchestra, Jagermeister, and Jesus Saves!* Other volunteers who had ridden the train told us that we needed new clothes to throw away because on the ride iron-ore dust would replace most of the threads. We also needed clothes that would keep us warm at night and maybe a blanket when the temperatures dropped and the wind blew through us. I found a navy jacket and a pair of pants that looked wind resistant. Amanda bought a mulafa that she could wear over other clothes. She said that she already had a jacket to wear. We decided that we didn't need a blanket; that we would be warm enough. Instead we purchased nonperishable food. Once we bought what we thought we needed, we walked to the garage where vehicles left for Choum. We found a truck and added our packs to the mound of cargo in the bed that would eventually stop growing below the window of the cab. After the driver secured it, the other passengers climbed on top and squeezed together until I saw little of the cargo.

Once we left the garage and Amanda fell asleep, I decided that the loss I felt as we left Jess and Kathy that morning was one of place, formed within a predetermined beginning and end. It was as much for whom I was around them as for whom they were around me. My personality is one that often bristles at intimacy, but while traveling in the confined spaces of long minutes, hours, and days, they learned more about me than I generally want people to know. Traveling had shaped me into someone I never was while stationary. It released me from the present to adjust time to whom I was or whom I aspired to be without recourse to history. The afternoon in a remote pool under the shade of date palms in the middle

of a Mauritanian afternoon would never materialize again even if we met under different circumstances, but Jess and Kathy validated this identity because it was our history. Amanda and I, however, knew each other when we were less capable. She reminded me of what I wanted to forget. I needed to be as Jess and Kathy knew me, someone that lived in that memory, in order to survive another year in Kankossa.

When Amanda and I entered the restaurant, we were so aware of the children pursuing us that we hardly noticed the giant of a man lying on a matela in front of us. He greeted us and directed us to matelas against the wall which hid us from the eyes of the children outside. He asked us if we were waiting for train, and then answered his own question: *Of course you are; everyone is waiting for the train.* I pursued the topic further, learning that it usually arrived around six in the evening and that those waiting gathered under a tent across the road. I followed his finger where he pointed though the cinderblock walls into the sun and across the street. As we talked, children chirped *nasrani* from outside the door. We ordered rice and meat, but the restaurant owner said that his refrigerator was broken, so if we wanted drinks we would have to buy them from a neighboring store. I volunteered to do this. Amanda was still feeling ill and didn't think she could deal with the children. I peeked around the corner and found eyes staring back at me. A little boy extended his hand and demanded, *Donne-moi cadeau!* I stood and walked towards him. His marble eyes widened and his gumball head tilted up in expectation. As I passed him, I placed my hand on his head and smiled.

A small group awaited me outside the door. I thought their chants pounded like drum beats. I was less concerned about the parade when I wasn't worried about Amanda. I knew that their power was collective, so if I singled one out, I could send him running. A few doors down I found a store with a refrigerator. The boys clogged the doorway behind me. I purchased two Fantas. When the storekeeper reached out to return my change, one of the larger boys jumped forward to accept it. He smiled. A partial gap darkened where an incisor too large for his mouth was growing. The storekeeper pulled back, and scolded him, but the boy merely retreated beyond his reach and laughed. I pocketed the change and turned to leave. Hands reached for the pocket where I stashed it, but I pushed them away and faced the

blockade of hands extended like mouths of baby birds. Instead of wading through, I slapped their open palms, giving the boys fives. They giggled and then protested that they wanted money, but the distraction had afforded me time to escape. I again turned the corner into the restaurant thinking that I was safe, but as soon as I sat down, the larger boy appeared in the breezeway. His orange shirt was torn at the shoulder and his shorts were dusty sweat pants cut-off. Once the owner woke from his shock, he yelled at him to leave. Instead of running the boy repeated his demands more slowly. He stood taut, struggling to control his fear. He'd raised the stakes and knew it. The owner yelled at him again, but only when he rose to his feet did the boy retreat farther into the breezeway. The owner bent to sit back down until he noticed that the boy was still loitering. He made one last charge, and the boy finally disappeared into the glare.

The owner mumbled as he returned to his seat. *Those boys are bandits! Their parents need to beat every one of them. You know it's because of you that they're like that. I mean not you, you don't give them anything, but western tourists who give them money, candy, and pens. They think they're just being nice, but look what they've turned them into. They expect it now. They're jackals.* He was right. Tourists see these children with outstretched hands and immediately think that because their clothes are tattered and their faces are dirty that they're begging to be rescued from a country without so much when in reality the attention they're receiving is the same as the attention that children give parade floats that threw candy into the crowd. Their disappointment was the same that children felt when the float passed and they remained empty handed.

Our plate of rice and meat arrived. Amanda and I mechanically balled the sticky rice and shoved it in our mouths. Food in the North always suffered from a lack of spice. The boys had started racing back and forth outside the doorway. Each yelled as he passed, but the demands were often poorly timed, so that the walls cut them into syllables: *Don . . . Nas . . . Cad.* Amanda said in between bites, *I don't want to leave the restaurant.* I suggested, *Well, maybe when we're ready to leave they will have gotten bored.* Amanda frowned. *Moi . . . eau . . . rani* competed with our conversation. *I don't think so,* she said. After we finished eating, both of us blocked the noise with music and closed our eyes until the

owner shook me half an hour later to tell me that we should probably move to the waiting area because the train would be coming soon.

When I removed my earbuds, I immediately noticed the silence. We gathered our things and shouldered our packs. Amanda repeated her dread. I told her, *Just walk fast and remain calm. We don't have far to go.* We thanked the owner and left the protection of the restaurant. The road was quiet and empty. As we neared the waiting area, the group of boys collected in the center of the road. We moved towards them; they moved towards us. I sensed that something had changed. They walked with purpose; their demands were more desperate. We pressed on. If we reached the waiting area, a deep tent hemmed by two buildings, then we could disappear in the crowd.

As the group surrounded us, I clutched my shoulder bag and pushed through their outstretched hands, but Amanda fell behind. A few of the boys had fistfuls of her clothes. She was slapping at their hands to weaken their grips. I turned back to help her, afraid of what might happen if she lost her temper. She managed to free herself, but when we started forward again, the half-toothed boy stood in defiance. He was clutching the corner of a broken cinderblock. He smiled and tongued the gap where his half-tooth grew. He reared back, threatening to throw the jagged cement piece. Instead of retreating, I yelled at him and strode ahead him with greater purpose. His smile fell. His arm slackened, but finally he decided to throw the cement, to follow through on his threat. The projectile left his hand without conviction. It wobbled on a weak arc and landed at my feet.

I glared at him as I continued forward. Scared, he sprinted away, stopping after a few seconds to see if I was still coming. Mauritians lining the store fronts watched intently, but no one moved to intervene. He sprinted off again, this time hiding behind one of the women attending a produce table. He had made a mistake by running to his mother, I thought. I snarled and tried to project authority. Once I reached the table, I looked down at the woman, whose body seemed to sprawl onto the ground. Her table joined with other women's to form phalanx of hostile eyes. A diminutive man slouched above the women on a chair. She glared at me with eyes that had sunken into her flabby cheeks. Everyone waited for me to say something. We all wondered if I could say anything. Finally, I demanded, *Is this your son?*

He peered at me from behind her back. She nodded. I waited. I expected her to at least acknowledge what he'd done. Each second filled the situation with more pressure. I was the outsider; I was the one who had to catch the train. She could stare at me all day, and then return home that evening and feed her family. Her son's behavior was my problem, and not hers. I fumbled in my mind for how to proceed. I hadn't made plans, but I knew that I needed to implicate her, threaten her honor, otherwise she would ignore me. I breathed deeply to gather strength behind my voice. *Your son threw a rock at me. Either you take care of him, or I will find the police.* I tried to sound confident, but I worried that she sensed my bluff. I had no idea where to find the police. Her neighbors looked at her to see how she would respond. One of them broke the silence, *He's right. I saw him thrown the rock.* A few others supported my witness. I maintained my stare. The mother glanced from one side to the other. She spun a carrot on her table. Then, in one continuous motion, she reached behind her massive body, yanked her son by his arm, and slapped him on the back of the head. He ducked to avoid subsequent blows, but his mother's hand found him two or three more times. He glared at me with his half tooth. The tension dropped from the air. That wasn't the result I hoped for, I just wanted him to leave us alone, but it was the result I should have expected. I strolled away, thinking that I had won.

The waiting area was a burrow. Sky-blue metal poles and a wooden lattice supported the black-canvass roof that covered the gap between two stores. Amanda and I ducked inside the opening. The smell of bodies overcame me before I could see them. When my eyes adjusted, rows of matelas, bodies on top of them, and piles of luggage around them covered the floor. People ignored us as we shuffled between them towards the rear. Everyone was somewhere else in a state of waiting.

We sat on matelas in impressions made by bodies that had waited there before us. The foam pads had escaped through broken stitches in the cloth covers and were disintegrating at the corners. The matela that I occupied felt moist with the oils and sweat that bodies leave behind. When I pulled away, the surface held onto my skin a little too long, and an orphan hair wrapped around my middle finger. I lay down anyway and closed my eyes. I retreated into memory, our last night in Chinguetti and Kathy's recovery.

A barred door opened to the restaurant where we wanted to eat. The sun dripped into the desert surrounding Chinguetti and was turning the day inside-out. We stared silently at the hand-painted sign, and its cartoon depiction of a chicken, fries, a camel, and a Coke can. We were committed to standing. Our inner thighs were still tender from the camel ride. The muezzin's haunting voice seeped from the Friday Mosque and flooded the old town—its old families, its deserted houses, and its worm-eaten libraries—and then flowed into the subdued lights of commerce in the new one. Mauriticians had abandoned the streets to break the Ramadan fast. We were anxious for some food.

Ahmed had waved at us from the balcony of his hotel and asked us to join him and his friends to break the fast. Jessica in particular was happy to never see him again. Staring at the restaurant sign, her expression was subdued. I asked Amanda, *How much longer do you want to wait?* Her hunger seemed fiercest. *Well, I don't know. How long do you think they will pray?* I shrugged, *It's possible that the restaurant won't open. They might be eating with their families.* Amanda had expected a more definitive answer.

We watched for someone who would feed us. A few men passed, but no one stopped. As we turned to leave, a teenager greeted us in French. *What are you looking for? Can I help you?* He pushed his dara'a that was sliding down his arms over his shoulder like a Roman dignitary adjusting his toga. When I asked in Hassaniya about the restaurant, he responded in English: *Oh, you speak Hassaniya? That's great! You must be Peace Corps volunteers. Only Peace Corps volunteers speak Hassaniya!* We were all shocked that he spoke English. *You know the Peace Corps?* I asked. *Of course, I know all of them. My name is Sidi. My family has hosted Peace Corps volunteers for years. Peace Corps volunteers taught me English.* He paused for a moment. *Do you know Sam? He's my beeeest friend!*

When he learned that we were expecting him from Atar that night, Sidi scanned the wadi. He took a few steps down the dune and said, *The car should be arriving soon. Maybe it's already here.* Moments later he pointed towards someone at the bottom of the dune. *Look, I think that's him.* We all strained to see a tall white man struggling up the dune. I started to suggest that I didn't see him when Sidi

yelled, *Sam, you butthead! Get over here!* Our laughter was suddenly uncontrollable. He turned back towards us, smiling proudly, *Sam taught me that word.* He glanced back to the wadi. *Ok, maybe that isn't him. But no one understood what I said.* Then he looked at me and asked, *What does 'douche-bag' mean?* He mouthed each syllable to pronounce them clearly. None of us could answer because none of us could breathe. *What? Is it a bad word?* he demanded. Amanda blurted, *Where did you hear that?* Sidi shrugged, *It's something Sam keeps calling me. I call him butthead; he calls me douchebag. But he won't tell me what it means. I know 'douche'. It means 'shower' in French, and I know 'bag', but they don't make sense together. What is a 'shower bag', and why would you call someone that?*

We all glanced at each other, wondering who would explain it to him. He waited anxiously. Jessica squinted at me. *You're the English teacher.* I deferred to Amanda. Then Kathy, still laughing, said, *It's something that women use to clean themselves.* Sidi nodded still confused. I tried to clarify, *But, it also means 'butthead'.* Sidi understood that. *Ah, it means the same as 'butthead'. Sam, he is a joker. He likes to joke tooooo much. Oh, but you are hungry. No, this one is closed for Ramadan. I will take you to a different one. My friend he works there.* Sidi whistled as he started down the dune.

Amanda tapped my shoulder and startled me to the present. I removed my earbuds and looked at her dark silhouette. *I need to pee. Where do you think I should go?* I glanced around the cave. This was always a problem while traveling. Mauritians usually relieved themselves anywhere—it wasn't taboo—so there weren't always facilities for westerners. I had already started to wonder what we would do on the train. *Did you see any latrines when we came in today?* She shook her head. *I didn't either. Do you want me to ask? I guess you could try to go behind the building. Maybe if you hurry around the corner the children won't see you.* She sighed. *I guess that might work.* I felt sorry that I didn't have a better suggestion. She hunched over and shuffled through the bodies. I again stopped my ears with music and returned to a happier present.

Sidi pointed toward the sky as we crossed the wadi. *Look! Stars!* He turned to us for approval. A few stars showed through the night. *I love looking at the stars. It reminds me of ET. You know that movie by Steven Spielberg?* Amanda answered, *Of course we do. It's a classic.* Sidi did his best imitation: *'ET phone home.'* Kathy clapped. *Where did you see ET?* Sidi turned and started walking backwards. *I saw it in Nouadhibou. Last year, I took some Australian tourists there.* Jess and I looked at each other in surprise. *You are a tour guide?* He shook his head, *Only that one time. It was lots of fun though. Maybe I will do that when I finish school. I also bought a guitar when I was there, but I'm still learning to play it though. Look, there is the restaurant.*

Naked bulbs cast a wedding dress over the patio tables. Sidi turned into a building and greeted his friend, *G'day mate!* He turned to us proud of his privileged knowledge. *He doesn't know what that means.* The friend looked irritated. *Hey, what does that mean?* he asked. Sidi reassured him that it was nothing bad, and then asked us what we wanted to eat. *They have camel sandwiches, chicken and fries . . . that is all tonight.* We all ordered camel sandwiches, but they could only make three so I ordered chicken. We sat at the patio table while Sidi talked with his friend. Sounds and smells of crackling meat and onions spilled out of the doors. Kathy commented, *It smells so good! I hope it's greasy.* Amanda smirked, *Don't worry. It will be.* When Sidi joined us, he was older under electric light. His eyes jumped around the patio. *He has started cooking,* Sidi announced. *It should only be ten minutes maybe.* Behind me I noticed two young girls buying bread for their family. *How long will you staying in Chinguetti?* he asked. Jess answered, *We are leaving tomorrow if we can get tickets.* Sidi's faced brightened. *I can take you to the garage after you eat.* I objected, *You don't need to do that. We can figure it out.* Sidi insisted, *No, I will go with you to make sure you get the correct price.* Secretly I appreciated it. I didn't know where to find the garage, and the moon was new. The young girls chatted as they walked out of the store with two bags of bread. Sidi was waiting. He shouted in Hassaniya after them, *Ladies, ladies, why do you buy bread from him? My bread is better.* They stopped and giggled. *No, we have enough for tonight.* Sidi persisted, *Are you sure? Mine is the best in town.* They covered

their mouths in embarrassment. *We can't. Our mother is waiting for us.* They slowly walked away. Sidi called after them, *Ok. Another time, God willing.*

Sidi grinned proudly and searched me for confirmation. He asked in Hassaniya, *Did you understand what I said?* I said that I did. He responded, *I like women too much. They are very sweet to me.* Jess and Kathy asked me what he said. Before I could answer, Sidi's friend yelled at him from inside the restaurant. Sidi chimed back, *Gsar umr-ak nte!* He again he looked at me to see if I understood. He explained, *I told him 'May God shorten his life!' It's a bad thing to say. If you tell a stranger that he will want to fight you, but he is my friend, so he knows I don't mean it. I shouldn't say it anyway, but that's the way friends talk to each other in Mauritania. He says the food is ready. I will help him bring it out.*

They set plates of food in front of us. *Why didn't you order anything, Sidi?* I asked. *We want to buy you dinner.* He waved his hands. *No, no, thank you. I had a little after mosque, and I will eat more later. My family is preparing a big meal to break the fast.* Between mouthfuls Kathy asked him, *Do you fast from food and water all day?* His face hardened. *I only made a mistake one time. The day was very hot, too hot, and I wanted to take a shower to cool off. While I was in the shower, I put some water in my mouth to wet it because my mouth was dry, and I accidentally swallowed some. My parents would have been killed me.* Jess consoled him, *Oh, Sidi. You are such a good Muslim.*

Kathy picked up her sandwich. Grease ran from the bun. She was pleased: *Oh my god this is a lot of grease!* Amanda tried to pick up hers, but the soggy bread broke and ground camel scattered across her plate. She laughed and took a bite. Between mouthfuls Kathy told him, *I play guitar. Maybe I can teach you something tomorrow morning. What kind of music do you listen to?* The question captured his attention. *I like all music. Mauritanian, of course. American music . . . I like Michael Jackson, Celine Dion, Jay-Z . . . my favorite is Tracy Chapman. What's the name of her song . . .* He started humming the tune to "Fast Car." *Yes, that's it "Fast Car." It goes—"I got a fast car, good enough to drive me anywhere" . . . That's all I can remember, but she's the best!* Kathy leaned over and whispered in my ear, *He so great! I wish I could take him home.* The excitement from her eyes spread to her face as if she'd

found her favorite stuffed animal that she'd lost behind the couch. She seemed to have recovered her fascination with the Sahara.

I heard her voice before I understood her words. She hyperventilated incomplete sentences: *I went behind . . . Like you said . . . They . . . It was so humiliating.* I filled in her elisions. I imagined her finding a place to squat unmolested in the empty when a hoard of children poured out from the cracks between buildings, encircled her, and demanded presents. *They pointed and laughed at me. I seriously might have killed one of them if I could have caught one. I just want to leave. I fucking hate this town!* I tried to help. *Don't worry, I said. You won't have to deal with them again. They won't find us here; the train will come soon.* We just had to wait.

Six o'clock neared. People started gathering their bags. Amanda decided that she needed to put on her mulafa. While she wrapped herself in cloth, the tent was emptying. A man who was sitting with another man, two women, and a child motioned to us that it was time. No one had acknowledged us all afternoon. We scooped our packs and hurried to the front of the tent. The man who had motioned to us was waiting. He said that he would show us to the train, and that we could ride in their car. Once my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw that the town was migrating. People carried small children and plaid canvas bags that were stretched like full stomachs. Porters steered donkey carts laden with bulk goods and building materials destined for resale in Nouadhibou. Amanda fell behind. She'd wrapped her mulafa too tightly around her legs, and was struggling like a hobbled camel. She tried to fix the wrap, but it fell to the ground in a plush pile. I took one of her bags, and she tried to wrap herself again. I was growing impatient. We were being left behind. The mulafa was again too tight. Amanda teetered to fall with each step. Her forehead was covered in sweat. The man we were following turned around to urge us on. Finally, I insisted that she just take the thing off and put it on later.

We finally caught up with our group. They were squatting next to the tracks and guarding their luggage like a hoard of treasure. One of the men was changing into socks and boots. He was struggling to force his foot through the top of the leather boot. I wondered where he had found a pair; Mauritians

rarely wore anything but sandals. Others were fitting into faded sweat shirts and shrunken jackets.

Amanda tried again to wrap herself in the mulafa. Our travel companions watched with amusement.

Amanda whispered, *I wish they would stop staring at me!* In a different situation, I thought that she might have found it amusing. She was usually good at laughing at herself. I reminded her that it was a little weird for a westerner to wear a mulafa anyway. *I don't care. They shouldn't laugh at me. I wouldn't laugh them in high heels.* I too found western women in mulafas hilarious.

The man who had finally wedged his foot into the boot asked me where we were from and why we were riding the train. He seemed a little puzzled that we would ride it for fun. I learned that they were transporting goods to their store in Nouadhibou and that they made the trip once every few months. Quickly the conversation turned personal as they often do. The man pointed at Amanda: *Is she your wife?* I asked Amanda, *Are you my wife or sister?* Women in Mauritania rarely traveled without their husbands or a relative. Unmarried or unrelated couples of the opposite gender were thought to be living in sin. Amanda said that she didn't care. I responded that she was my wife. It didn't matter, I thought. They never believed us anyway. The man didn't ask any more questions.

The sun was hanging only inches above the horizon. I thought that the train would arrive soon; that our waiting was almost finished. I rocked back on my heels and stared down the tracks that bent west into the desert. Bulges of people and bags followed the tracks like buttons on a shirt. *So here we are,* I said aloud, *newlyweds on our honeymoon!* Amanda ignored my joke. *Twelve hours,* I thought aloud. *Maybe the spectacle of it will entertain me until I'm tired enough to sleep. Once morning comes we'll have almost arrived.* I followed a silhouette walking across the tracks where it disappeared into clutter of building on the other side. Life across the tracks appeared roughshod. People seemed only partially committed to living there. Most dwellings were semi-permanent limbars that families could abandon or even transport if they needed. The few cement structures remained unfinished. The best evidence that people intended to stay were clothes flagging on an invisible clothesline.

I grew anxious. I was tired of waiting and I had run out of memories. I needed the present. I attempted conversation with Amanda, but her responses just rolled from her mouth and plopped in the

sand. The afternoon had worn on her. *I'm sorry. I just don't have any energy*, she said. I decided that I needed to buy something, but hadn't decided what. I strolled a hundred yards to the market.

Storekeepers were preparing to shut their doors, carrying display goods back into the store. I hurried to buy two bags of water to fill my bottle at the nearest store. I had the habit of drinking more when I was bored. I tore a corner from one with my teeth and drained it into my bottle. Then I did the same with the other. I winced as I threw the bags on the ground. They looked like ruptured eyeballs in the sand. I spent my money and left my trash. Perhaps a goat would eat them. That's the excuse to which I had resigned myself, after a year in Mauritania. One woman passed me with bag of meat. Two children raced a slashed car tire down the street. They didn't notice me. They seemed content with the present, content with waiting for the train, and content to watch it leave without them.

My travel companions were still waiting when I returned to the tracks. The man in boots told me the train would be coming soon. As he said this, the tracks started vibrating. He whistled at me and motioned me away from the tracks as I was already stepping back. The train approached slowly. Then the engine rumbled by and the maroon cars. When it finally stopped, groups separated and overtook the train like ants attacking a millipede. Despite the apparent chaos, there was a routine. Two men quickly climbed the nearest car, and we shot-putted bags to their arms. Once our group's luggage was aboard, we climbed up the ladder onto a mound of rust-colored ore chunks. We had gotten lucky. The train also carries an ore powder, which blows in the wind and infests everything. The men started preparing the car. They piled luggage into the corners, and then squatted on top of the mound and began kicking the larger chunks to the sides to expose coarser grains below. Then, they spread blankets for the women and children. Car after car passengers were doing the same. Amanda and I did as they did, but since we didn't have a blanket, we sat directly on the ore. We situated our bags and started wiggling out spaces for our bodies when a man, who appeared to be alone, extended his blanket to offer us a place to sit.

* * * *

Screeeeeeech—the train strained against its load and woke me from sun-drugged sleep. I propped myself against the mound of iron ore. Dents in my back reminded me where I'd been. Once the brakes

released, the wheels *ticked, ticked, ticked* over the tracks. The Sahara's hot bellows had wrapped my hawli around my face like an indigo mask. I peeled the cloth from my eyes and squinted through forge glow into a haze of spindrift sand that shrouded the desert. Granules of sand crunched in my teeth. I swallowed water to clear my mouth and glanced at Amanda who was curled and shrunken, pinned between the mound of ore and the side of the car. She looked like a chimney sweep. Her face was hidden under a mound of cloth and her arms defended against the wind. Ore dust soiled her lime jacket red ochre. The bandana that she used to cover her hair was stained with sweat and oil. I imagined that I looked the same and scratched my hairline, collecting strata of dead skin, salt crystals, ore dust, and sand to prove it. Above me Mauritanian bodies were piled among other Mauritanian bodies. No one talked; no one moved. We remembered that only hours ago we were soaked and shivering, and anticipated that in a few more we would arrive in Nouadhibou.

It was the place that Mauritanian volunteers visited in their daydreams while drenched in their sweat every afternoon at every other location around the country, the place where temperatures were cool, food was spiced, and beer flowed. Situated on Baie du Levrier, protected from the Canary Current by a peninsula named Cap Blanc, Nouadhibou is Mauritania's only deep water port. A thin border between Western Sahara and Mauritania halves the hangnail peninsula that extends from the mainland into the Atlantic Ocean. The Canary Current, traveling from the deep waters off the coast of Spain and Portugal, creates an upswell, lifting nutrients and cold water from the depths to the surface off the Nouadhibou's coast creating some of the world's richest fishing waters and a temperate climate. The fishing attracts sailors from the EU, Russia, Japan, and China as well as their tastes in entertainment. Because of its relative isolation and corrupt officials, vices readily condemned on the mainland find blind-eyed acceptance. In addition to Chinese karaoke bars, pool halls, and a Christian church, Nouadhibou is quickly developing into an African center for human trafficking and the South American drug trade. It is a place of exploitation in a country where people live to survive.

The clock on my phone read two—nearly seventeen hours into a trip that was supposed to last twelve. *Mark will be worried*, I thought. We had arranged to stay with him for a few days. He was a

third-year Nouadhibou volunteer, only a few weeks from finishing his service, and had rarely left the city. Once in Nouakchott, I shared a motel room with him, and had a conversation as he was leaving about how he was leaving and we hadn't even met. I stared at the face of my phone, waiting for signal bars to appear like an eyebrow in the left corner. I decided that there was nothing I could do and turned it off. Parallel to the train, diminutive buildings appeared through the spindrift, and chugging trucks bounced over undulating sand tracks. We were getting close. Signs of life thickened as we ticked along. For a moment, I thought I saw water. Sea birds appeared as pen scratches against the sky and battled the wind. The buildings, cement blocks interrupted by an occasional window, were sterile white of industry. The arm of a crane, perforated with steel triangles, dangled a cable over a mound of industrial waste—rusted metal parts, fractured railroad ties, and cement bells once in the ground now atop hollow poles. But as the train passed the industrial complex, I saw nothing ahead, not even the engine, as if throughout the trip, we had been pulled along by an invisible hand, a child's in play. The buildings now disappeared, leaving flat desert and a macadam that ran parallel to the tracks. I started to become nervous. Riding atop the iron ore train was illegal, so ignoring the illegality meant that there were no police to maintain order in the inevitable chaos of hundreds of passengers disembarking at a nondescript spot outside of town. It was one of those liminal spaces between destinations such as a port or a border crossing where the state of nature thrived. Travelers, weary from the journey and unfamiliar with the place, were prey to whatever seductions or threats would transport them from the cacophony of price haggling, bickering, and joyous reunions to places that appeared more familiar. I worried again that among the grabbing hands and demanding voices that my Hassaniya would fail us.

After settling atop the ore car in Choum the previous day, the singularity of the experience intoxicated us with a sense of discovery. I gleaned all that I could glean under the naked sky and committed it to memory. I traced the endless line of cars with my camera. Wisps of dust raced next to the train as if stirred by phantom stallions. As I reclined contently, my mind wandered in awe of those who lived in and fought for this land that I thought so obviously didn't want them. I thought that for the

Mauritanians traveling with us, life only changed locations. At the front of the car, in the foreground of the setting sun, a woman mounded torn cardboard, broken sticks, and grass against the car's lip. She crouched against the wind swirling, struck a match, and nursed the burgeoning flame with a cardboard fan as smoke reluctantly rose and then vanished in the wind. Men squatted to perform ablutions, teetering on one foot then the other, rinsing the dirt from their ankles and between their toes. The woman tending the fire placed a soot-stained teapot on the moldering coals that blinked from ashy white to bright orange with each pass of her fan. When they finished their ablutions and balanced atop the ore with their dara'as flagging in the headwind, and genuflected in prayer. Spindrift shrouded a bare-chested mountain range that stood over an accidental nomad tent and guarded the Rio de Oro, the southern half of the long disputed Western Saharan territory, named for an atavistic east-west river that evaporated or disappeared underground long ago.

While the Sahara appeared a long, continuous expanse, this border had been distinctly drawn not by any visible markers but by the threat of landmines, which remained from the war between Mauritania and the Polisario Front over the southern half of the Rio de Oro in the late 1970s. Homeland of Sahrawi Arabs, the land has long been in dispute for its minerals and the rumors of oil. Arabs marauding from the Middle East were the first. The imperial Spanish reluctantly followed. In the 1970s, the Sahrawi, financed by Algeria, created a military wing called the Polisario. They upgraded from horses and scimitars to pickups and automatic weapons. After the Spanish withdrew, Morocco and Mauritania asserted competing claims. In response, the Polisario raided villages to the north and south. The ore train became a primary target. Multiple times, they dynamited the tracks, spilling its contents and damaging its rails. Out manned and poorly financed, the Mauritanian army imploded and the government withdrew their claim to the territory. The Moroccans, however, were more resilient. They immediately annexed what Mauritania vacated. In 1991 they signed a cease-fire agreement, yet ninety thousand Sahrawi still live in refugee camps, which the Moroccan air force still bombs occasionally.

Around ten, lightning connected in spider webs and illuminated a ceiling of clouds. Thunder followed. *Our luck*, I thought. *Rain in the Sahara*. The train had stopped at an outpost where men hurried with bulky objects among truck headlights to load and unload cargo. A wind thick with moisture preceded the storm. Amanda asked, *Do you think it will rain?* I shrugged, *I don't know. Maybe it will blow over, but we should pull out our raincoats*. The temperature had gradually fallen as the heat from the ore had escaped into the night. Meanwhile the train continued to sit on the tracks. We watched the storm hover more closely. The wind intensified. When I felt the first drops, anxiety flushed my mouth with the taste of aluminum. A thunder concussed the air. We balled inside our jackets as if preparing for a beating. The drops fell heavier, turned into a shower, and finally a torrent. Our rain gear was of little use. The storm assaulted us from all sides as if we were passing through a snake. Rain fell from above and fell from below, splashing off the ore. Its white noise packed into my ears. Thunder shook the air and lightning flashed through my eyelids. Wind cut to our skin, and dropping temperatures seeped into our bones. Amanda whined and shivered like a wounded animal. My teeth clattered.

I looked around for shelter. Our Mauritanian traveling companions were all huddled under blankets. I regretted that we didn't have our own. I thought about asking them to share, and then considered hiding under the train. Finally I realized that we were actually lying on a blanket. The man who was sharing it with us was a fuzzy lump underneath it. I shook Amanda and yelled through the roar of the storm. Braids of rain dropped from my eyebrows and across my lips as I waited for her to respond. She seemed in shock. I tugged on her jacket, and then started pulling at the blanket. Finally, she propped herself up and understood what I was trying to do. We struggled to squeeze underneath and wrenched as much length as we could from our snoring companion, but my right leg hung largely exposed. Water dumped from the side and into my cuff. Nothing about the situation was comfortable, but our body heat gathered underneath. I stopped shivering and my breathing calmed. Her body too stopped shaking. I turned and huddled closer to her to get out of the rain. Storm after storm tore through the sky. Around midnight, the weather paused long enough for the train to continue, but a fourth storm forced it to stop again. A fifth and sixth followed, and we made no more progress that night. At five in the morning, the

rain finally abated. Men and a few women descended from the train and strolled into the soaked desert. I followed them. We all defecated together, and then they prayed.

When the train finally stopped at Port Mineralier outside Nouadhibou, my body kept moving. I tried to stand with the rest of the passengers, but I stumbled and sat back down to regain my legs. I woke Amanda who was somehow still sleeping. The man who had shared his blanket with us spoke for only the second time on trip and gestured with his hand that we should come. We gathered our things and moved with our packs to the edge of the train where a man was waiting to toss them over the side. Up and down the train people were jettisoning and climbing as if escaping a burning building. Taxis lined both sides of the road for nearly the length of the train. Drivers had started moving toward the gathering crowd. Amanda climbed down first, and I followed. The metal burned my hands. *Fuck. We made it*, I said. Amanda looked around. People were now scurrying toward the road. *What do we do now?* she asked. The air was full of competing voices. Taxi drivers were picking off passengers as they neared the road. *Let's walk. I don't want to deal with that mess.* Her brow crossed. *What? Walk? We don't know where we're going, and I don't even think I can walk that far with my pack.* Her questions irritated me. She wasn't the one who would have to deal with the people. *It's only a half mile. I'm sure you can make it.* Amanda's voice rose. *How do you know it's a half mile? We don't know where . . .* I cut her off. *I watched the road on our way in. We'll call Mark when we get close.* Her voice became shrill. *But, Jeremy, I really can't walk that far. I'm exhausted.* All she had to do, I thought, was follow. I wondered how difficult was it to go where you were told. I was surprised by my anger. She stared at me, waiting for an answer, I avoided her stare. She was probably right, I admitted to myself. I wasn't sure where the road led. I didn't answer her, but stomped away, searching for a taxi driver.

The challenge was not getting ripped off. White tourists usually meant a lucrative payday because many don't know the correct price or to negotiate. I thought that I needed to isolate a driver and negotiate with him before alerting the others. One located me. He was walking toward us waving his hand and greeting us. I preferred to initiate transactions because it established control. My eyes hardened

as he asked, *Where are you going? Nouakchott or Nouadhibou?* Cigarette stains darkened the gap between his front teeth that showed in his half smile. Wire-rimmed sunglasses hid his eyes. *We're just going into town*, I said. His face appeared indifferent. *Ok, follow me.* He reached to take my backpack. *Wait*, I stopped him. *How much?* He examined our baggage. *Two thousand.* His offer was ridiculous. Without responding, I started again toward the road. The driver hurried to catch up. *How much? How much will you pay?* I slowed before reaching the other drivers. *Three hundred*, I said. His shoulders dropped. I imagined that his eyes widened behind his glasses. *Three hundred? This is not possible you have too much baggage. Six hundred for both of you.* I shook my head and pursed my lips. *Four hundred.*

By this time Amanda had caught up. *How much does he want?* I answered her while the driver waited. She responded in English, *Isn't four hundred too much? A taxi in Nouakchott is only one or two hundred.* The driver unsure what was transpiring interjected in Hassaniya, *Four hundred is not enough. I have children and a wife to feed. Give me five hundred.* Frustrated with both of them, I took off again for the road. The driver didn't let me get far before grabbing onto my pack. *Ok, ok. Four hundred. Let me have your bag. I will carry it for you.* He reached for Amanda's as well. *Follow me.* He started through the crowd. Amanda suggested, *Shouldn't we ask some other drivers? We might be able to get a better price.* As I turned to follow the driver, I said, *Let me know what you find out.*

We pushed through sweaty bodies and overstuffed luggage. Drivers hissed, shouted, and grabbed at our clothes to get our attention, and we did our best to ignore them. Our driver crossed the road and opened the trunk of a black Mercedes that straddled the road and the sand shoulder. He tossed our packs in and shut the lid. *Wait here*, he said. *I will find more passengers.* He disappeared into the crowd. *Should I get in first?* I asked Amanda, trying to be diplomatic. She answered, *You'll have to right? So that I won't be sitting next to a man?* I scooted to the middle over the cracked-leather seats. *If it's a woman, we'll switch*, I suggested. Sand powdered the carpeted floor. Amanda closed the door behind her. *We survived*, I sighed. Amanda nodded. She rested her head on the back of the seat and spoke to the roof. *I've never spent a more miserable night in my life! I seriously thought I might freeze to death.* I

murmured in agreement. All I could think of was a welcoming face. I tried calling Mark and left a message on his voice mail. *I hope we don't have to find him*, I commented. The city was too big to ask around for the white guy as we had in Chinguetti. I was desperate to wash off the trip and to put on fresh clothes.

The driver returned with another passenger. He raised the trunk lid, blocking the view through the back glass. I strained to overhear their conversation as he arranged the luggage. The other passenger was a man. They chatted about where they were from and their relatives. The new passenger laughed at something I couldn't understand. Through the space between the lid and the trunk, a soft blue floated toward the opposite door. The man was no one I had seen before. He gathered this dara'a before he reached for the door handle. When the trunk lid slammed shut, I turned quickly to see if the driver would search for another passenger, but was confronted by the silver grill of a semi-truck that collided with the side of the car. I pulled Amanda towards me as the truck raked across the door so that I heard its destruction in phases. Metal crunched and scraped in a tight-fisted line. Glass fractured in quiet bursts. Plastic stretched and snapped in a patient whine. Once the truck stopped it blocked the light from the car windows so that Amanda's head was in silhouette. I was uninjured, but I ran my hands over my clothes for blood. *Amanda, Amanda! Are you alright?* My clothes were clean. She was breathing heavily. *I think so*, she responded. The door seemed undamaged, and the window only cracked. On the other side of the car, the new passenger was still holding the door. He stuck his head inside to check on us.

Outside the car, the bumper lay twisted on the ground next to the smashed driver's side mirror. Our driver came running to check on us. *Come*, he said. *I will get you another car*. He retrieved our luggage from the trunk and hurried up the road. When we caught him, he was standing next to another Mercedes. *Here*, he said. *This man will take you to town for your price*. He deposited our packs in our new taxi, and then sprinted back towards his car where the truck driver was inspecting the damage. He yelled and flailed his arms, and the truck driver consoled. Our new driver motioned for us to get in the car. We squeezed in, he accelerated, and I thought that we too were living to survive.

Mark's apartment was in one of the city's tallest buildings. The air inside held the night's chill that had seeped through the cement walls. His floors were toothy-white tile and clean. From his window, the city moved among car horns and the clip-clop of donkey carts. A small white dome, *the Catholic Church*, Mark said, rested on a hill in the center of town. Mark turned on the television. Amanda and I stared in disbelief. He was the only volunteer who personally owned a TV. *I don't watch it much*, he said a little embarrassed. *But I get CNN and BBC America, which are nice. I figure that I have the extra money so I might as well use it. I'm an old man, and need the creature comforts.* Amanda objected, *You're not that old!* Mark smiled. *Well, I'm a good ten years older than both of you. Let me show you the shower. I'm sure you'll want to use it soon.* He motioned for us to come. Our eyes grasped for the TV screen as we left the room.

The shower looked like a shower. *It's a little tricky sometimes. The head'll fall off. When it does, the water'll shoot out real hard, so you'll want to make sure everything important is out of the way. It usually has plenty of hot water, though. And with the toilet, you have to jiggle the handle a little to get the plunger to go down. Otherwise it'll run, and I'll get a big bill.* Only volunteers in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou had western toilets. *I don't entertain*, he confessed. *There are so many volunteers who come through that if I stopped everything for each one, I would never get anything done. I'm teaching a business class tonight, but I think that tomorrow night I'm free. We'll go out then.* We assured him that we understood. Mark was known for the busy schedule he kept. In addition to the classes he taught, he worked at the Peace Corps Girls' Mentoring Center. Mark gathered a few notebooks and waved stiffly. *If you need anything you have my number. Feel free to call.* The door shut behind him, and the rest of the afternoon we cleaned sand from unlikely places.

The next morning Amanda and I left early for the commercial fishing port. We easily found its brutish wall that supposedly protected from sabotage and terrorists. We followed it to the gate. A crowd of Africans moved effortlessly through the arched entrance from one side to the other, yet one of the two policemen guarding it stopped us and asked for our passports. He looked at our identity cards and tilted

them from one corner to the other. He returned them, and then said, *You have to get permission from the commander to enter.* Amanda and I looked at each other. The tourist office didn't say anything about getting permission when we visited the evening before. *Where's the commander's office?* I asked. *It's in that direction,* he pointed toward the center of town. *How do we get there?* He offered some vague directions. *Once we get there we can get permission?* I asked skeptically. He replied, *Yes, after one or two days.* Our eyes widened. *One or two days! Can't we just call him?* I showed him my phone out of desperation. *It's not possible,* he answered.

His face remained stoic. His arms crossed his puffed chest. *You think he wants a bribe?* Amanda asked. *Probably,* I said. *I'm not paying it though.* I looked at the policeman. *What is your commander's phone number? I want to call him for directions.* He paused before he answered, *I don't have his number.* I turned from him to ask the other policeman, and when he refused, I started asking people walking in and out of the port. The policeman looked anxious. *Ok,* he said. *I'll let you in this one time, but don't take any pictures.* We didn't give him time to reconsider and walked into a labyrinthine market of sky blue doors, stacks of black-plastic octopus pots, and rusty piles of tangled anchors. I fingered my camera in my pocket, but decided to wait. *Where do we go now?* Amanda asked. I responded, *I don't know. I guess we keep walking until we find water.* Soon we emerged from the market at a wharf. In the distance, colorful African skiffs were bunched hid the surface of the water so that someone could cross the port stepping from one to the next. A few European trawlers sat idly. A sliver of land extended into the bay beyond the wall. *Let's go there,* I pointed.

We followed the wall. The dirt track wrapped around the inlet until we were across from his store where more skiffs were overturned and piled on each other. A man standing outside his shop waved at us. Amanda wanted to stop. He introduced himself as Ahmed and handed us two Fantas from his refrigerator. Masses of squares and knots cluttered his floor and hung on his wall. Faded and cracked orange-striped buoys of all sizes filled a shelf above his head. He rested on a tall, wooden stool. I asked him if the nets were his. He smiled, *Mauritanians don't fish.* I pointed to the boats outside his door. *Those are Senegalese,* he said. *Only one group of Mauritanians fish. They live south of here and fish*

from the shore. I'd heard of this group. They were Imraguen, a small ethnic group with a few villages along the coast, who tossed nets into the surf and used dolphins to help corral their catch. He said that he mended nets. *I learned in Spain,* he bragged. *That is why I waved at you. I like foreigners since I was one too.* He mentioned a group of French tourists that stayed with him for a week. He pulled their phone number from his pocket for proof.

He took us on a tour of the harbor. The land disappeared, and we waded through a marshy break to the strip of beach. There were old buildings in the distance. Ahmed said that they were built by the Spanish and were the first in the harbor. The ocean air had rusted their corrugated roof and molded their white walls. *Usually, there are more boats,* he volunteered, *but most of them have left for the season because of the fishing ban.* I asked him to explain. *In the past, everyone fished year-around, but the fish are disappearing because they didn't have time to recover. The Europeans and Japanese with their big boats caught too many fish, and the government was too weak to regulate them. Now they can't fish during breeding season.* I read later that in 2011, the Mauritanian government signed on to a twenty-five year deal with the Chinese that will put most of the African fishermen out of business.

Just offshore, rotting wood posts that I thought were the remnants of a wharf broke through the turquoise water. Seagulls perched on the stubs. Beyond them, a graveyard of European fishing trawlers listed in the shallow water. Rust streaked some and consumed others much like leprosy. I asked if I could take pictures. He said that it was no problem. When I told him about our problem, he explained that the police probably thought we were reporters. *Many foreign reporters have come because of the immigration problem,* he explained. Amanda asked him where all of the rotting boats came from. He appeared irritated by the question. *Some companies bribe city officials to leave old boats there so they don't have to pay to dispose of them. The government . . . they are always eating the money.* I learned later that Nouadhibou's ship graveyard was the largest in the world with over three hundred ships rotting into the ocean.

When we returned to his shop, he asked, *So both of you will come for lunch tomorrow?* Amanda said we would try. He and Amanda exchanged phone numbers. *Call me tonight and tell me what time*

you will come. I nodded, *In'shallah.* We negotiated the maze of stores toward the entrance. Amanda and I argued about whether we would eat at his house the next day. She was eager. *It will be fun.* I was less enthusiastic. *But we will have to spend the whole afternoon . . . and he'll want to talk to us.* I felt bad that I had tired of Mauritanian company, but it was so difficult to communicate sometimes even in English. I needed time to recover before returning to Kankossa. *Well,* she said. *Maybe I'll go by myself.* She avoided my eyes. I didn't believe her nor did I explain that I hoped she would remain with me.

That night, the three of us talked in the soft air inside the courtyard of a Chinese restaurant and bar. Mark and I had ordered beer; Amanda ordered a Coke. Our table was in the corner next to a curtain that hid a passageway that appeared to go around the building to the back of the restaurant. Ornamental lights weaved among leafy trees and draped across the courtyard where the proprietor and his friends were drinking. Otherwise, the restaurant was empty. *It's popular with Spanish fishermen,* Mark said, *but most of them have left because of the fishing ban.* I teased Amanda about not ordering alcohol. *It just doesn't seem right,* I insisted. *It's why we came here.* Only few bars in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou had licenses. They generally peddled to lonely ex-pats. A waiter delivered our drinks, and then left quickly. With a beer in front of me, I felt that I had accomplished something. We'd been made small by the Sahara, children in Choum, thunderstorms, and a semi-truck, but we were still in possession of ourselves. As we clanked mugs, drank throaty drafts, and thudded the wooden table with the mugs' full weight. The physicality of drinking reassured me that I could act upon the world. That I had a presence among things.

Just as Mark and I started appreciating our beer and Amanda her coke, a white Moor woman entered the courtyard through the front door in the wall. We all looked. The woman seemed to know that we would. Her mulafa sagged on her body as her desert-worn skin sagged on her face. She leaned back as she walked to support her weight. She glanced confidently across the courtyard. A young girl hugged the doorframe behind her. The woman uncovered her black hair and approached our table with an openmouthed smile as if biting into a pear.

She greeted us and shook everyone's hand. *What is she doing here?* I asked Mark discreetly. He answered out of the side of his mouth, *I don't know. I usually don't see Mauritanian women in bars.* She continued to greet us. *This is my daughter, Zeinabou.* She motioned for the girl to walk through the door. She slid along the wall. Her puerile curves shaped her mulafa. Her eyes were strained and anxious. The woman switched between fragmented French and Spanish unsure what we spoke. *Oh, you're American!* She said and offered us her only English words. *New York! George Bush! One, two, three, five!* Mark tried some of his limited Hassaniya and asked her how she was with the heat. It was a common greeting, but she responded with a playful cackle, *Gsar Umr-ak, you bandit!* She pulled a match from a hidden pocket and threw it at him. Mark's eyes widened at her response. *Do you have any idea what just happened? Did I say something wrong?* he asked me. I smiled. *I think she took 'heat' a little differently than you intended it.* Amanda giggled, *This is so bizarre.*

The woman continued the greetings that we all were tiring of hearing. Finally she asked Mark, *Aren't you going to ask me to sit down?* He looked around and said, *Sorry, I don't think we have another chair.* She looked insulted, but didn't leave. We stared at her, waiting for her to do something. *So . . .*, her French hung in the air. She stared at us staring at her. The girl pressed against the wall, trying to disappear. Amanda, Mark, and I looked at each other, and then looked back to her. She dropped her smile. *Buy me a beer.* Mark laughed, *You know we can't do that.* She looked offended, *Sure you can. You're American; you're rich. Just go in the restaurant and ask for one.* He shook his head. She pled with him, *Just one. No one will know. I'll drink it like this.* She acted as if she were hiding it under her mulafa. Mark sighed. *Look we'll buy you a beer next time.* This didn't satisfy her. After trying a few more times, she gave up. Pointing toward the sky, she told him, *Ok, but remember, God hears what you say.*

She walked across the courtyard and tried the other table. They welcomed her, and offered her a seat. She removed another match and a cigarette from her hidden pocket. *What do you think she's doing?* Amanda asked Mark. He shrugged, *Maybe she's an alcoholic, but I don't think they'll serve her. They usually kick Mauritanians out pretty quickly.* The girl who'd remained by the door tucked her chin

and stared at the base of the wall. The woman laughed at comments we couldn't hear. Amanda's phone started ringing. It was Ahmed. Mark and I lost interest in the other table and talked to forget the awkward scene. On the phone, Amanda encouraged conversation. *Look!* I said. The waiter emerged from the restaurant with a beer for the woman. Then I heard the woman raise her voice and motion for the girl. She walked with reluctant steps toward the table.

As her mother grabbed her arm and pulled her to the table, a chocolate-splotched puppy emerged from the curtain next to our table. It sniffed the ground and gazed up curiously. Amanda hung up her phone. *What did he want?* I asked. Amanda said something about declining his invitation to lunch, but our attention shifted to the puppy as it wagged under the table. Its nose wetted my fingers. We reached for its soft fur, but it never remained under our hands for long. It was searching for food rather than attention. When it found nothing to eat, it disappeared behind the curtain. I looked across the courtyard and noticed that the girl had disappeared as well. When I pointed this out, Amanda thought one of the men was missing too. *Maybe he just went into the restaurant for a drink*, I speculated. Mark responded, *I don't know, but I'm more concerned about where she went. She wouldn't have left, would she? Her mother's still here.* Amanda thought that maybe she was using the restroom. We sat nervously for her to return.

Fifteen minutes later, the girl emerged from the restaurant. She walked to the table and collapsed in a near-by chair. Her mother handed her a cigarette and lit it for her. A man followed and sat across the table. Amanda said that he was the man she remembered. The girl pulled on the cigarette so that the ash glowed with authority. Everyone in the courtyard watched while her mother hissed to her in terse phrases through her teeth. We all strained to hear even those who wouldn't have understood if she'd spoken at full volume. The girl appeared alone with her cigarette. When she finished it, they rose to leave. The girl hurried to the door, but the mother shook hands with everyone in the courtyard. *Remember your promise!* she pointed at Mark. The girl had crossed her arms and concentrated on her frown. The woman waved as she walked toward the door as if exiting a stage, and delivered her final line: *We leave you with God.*

The next night, Amanda wore a floral-patterned shoulder dress that she'd somehow saved from the rain and sandals that wrapped her heels and sparkled unexpectedly. *I thought I might want to dress up one night*, she explained. We were preparing to eat at *Merou*, an expensive Asian restaurant recommended by some friends. I wore what I had, and felt a little insufficient. *You look nice*, I offered. She smiled. Her cheeks looked fresh as if she'd recovered some faith that she might survive the trip. That night, it was just her and me.

Street lights cast shadows that veiled the drunk-faced youths passing us on the way to restaurant. Stores locked with crossbars hemmed us on one side and busy traffic on the other. The Ramadan fast had broken. People were out feeding. Youths moved in like groups though the thick night. Teenage boys striped in European club-soccer jerseys walked ahead of us. They bantered in Wolof and jostled for dominance, shoving each other off the sidewalk onto the street. Their hungry eyes seemed to caress all things female. A group of girls shuffled toward us through a milky light in plastic jeweled sandals. The girls were tightly wrapped pills in matching midnight blue and chocolate, two-toned mulafas. The most confident of the boys barked for their attention, and laughed when they ignored him. The girls were huddling in hushed excitement around a cell phone. One glanced up and appeared to steer the other two.

As we passed them, Amanda stopped. Her sandals were blistering her heels. She bent over to stretch them out, and complained that she hadn't broken them in. I tried to wait patiently. Another group of women approached in laughter. Their motley-colored, wax-print outfits, patterned with Coke bottles, peacock eyes, and melting flowers, competed for attention. Amanda continued to adjust her sandals. Her dress blossomed at her shins. I worried about all the attention her white skin drew. The tepid ocean air, thick with brine and humidity, dispersed car horns and choked engines so that noise came from all directions. The women's eyes, shadowed in turquoise, rose, and lavender, encouraged me to follow them as they walked by. Matching talons hung by their sides. Amanda confessed, *I wish I would have worn my other sandals*. I suggested that we could return for them. She hobbled into stride. *No, I'll manage. I have to break them in sometime*.

We stopped three more times. The traffic on the sidewalks thinned and the streetlights lit dimmer closer to the restaurant. Amanda complained between each adjustment, and I grew tired of waiting and listening. *Why don't you just walk barefoot?* I asked. She rolled her eyes and asked, *On the nasty sidewalk?* A man passed alone. His face was long and desperate, and his clothes looked as if they would smell. Knotted toes hung over the ends of his chewed sandals. I felt that we were vulnerable. In a city filled with immigrants and emigrants all seeking to disappear, everyone thought that our wallets offered opportunities to do that. My legs ached to carry me quickly, but I had to wait on Amanda.

The restaurant was empty of people, but Asian landscape paintings decorated the walls. Our presence broke the stillness that preserved the incongruity of its existence in Mauritania. A waitress directed us to a booth lit by a sconce embellished with calligraphy, river grass, and cherry blossoms. Paper hanging lamps with tassels passed above our heads. I was impressed by the owner's effort in creating not-Mauritania. It seemed the product of collusion between memory and imagination that brought a chameleon familiarity, an anodyne to ease the loneliness of being in a place without being a part of it.

We looked in each other's eyes as we slid into the booth and knew we had nothing to talk about. The menus were in French and Spanish. The wine list was printed on an insert. We argued about words we didn't know. *This meal will be the most expensive I'd eaten in Mauritania*, I commented. *A glass of wine costs more than the food my family eats in three days*. I exaggerated a little, but we each still ordered one because we could. In my mind, it was my reward for suffering the ten pounds I'd lost in the first year.

When it arrived, we each sipped cautiously. *It tastes like wine*, Amanda mentioned. I looked across the table. *What did you expect?* I swirled the wine and peered through the glass. The wine's legs streaked the bowl and distorted the room and Amanda's brown hair like water dripped on a watercolor painting. *Do you want an appetizer?* Amanda asked. *Sure*, I said. *Order what you want*. As I swirled the wine approached the lip of the glass. I imagined that no one else was in the restaurant. *Does calamari sound good?* When I didn't respond she said, *Would you stop doing that? You're going to get*

it everywhere. I twirled the glass a few more times and then set it on the table. *You make the decision,* I challenged. I was tired of making them. She sighed and returned to the menu. I tapped the table with the end of my silverware roll. *Do you like the wine?* I asked, feeling guilty for my obstinacy. *It's fine. I'm going to order calamari. I've never had it before.* I nodded. *It's good. You'll like it.* The clack of metal and wood filled the silence. Amanda stared at me, so I left the silverware alone. She continued to look at the menu. An occasional car horn penetrated the walls. I searched the room for something to interest me and found nothing. The absence of Jess and Kathy was still present to me. *I'm not good at . . .* I started to confess, but Amanda didn't acknowledge me. The weight of each other's company was too much for us.

I had spent most of that day alone. We'd hired a taxi to drive us to the tip of the peninsula, the end of the Sahara, where monk seals sometimes gathered and an ocean liner had wrecked. On the way, there were more ship cemeteries. The driver explained that international companies bribed local officials to allow them to dump the ships, and then he showed us where West Africans embarked for the Spanish-owned Canary Islands. He pointed to tracks in the sand that went over a small hill. I imagined an empty beach. *They pile like animals into skiffs early in the morning and aim for the Islands,* he said. *They're crazy. They don't know where they're going, and when they get there, the authorities send them back. When the water runs out, many burn up in the sun and die.* The driver glanced at us in his rearview mirror to observe our responses. *Then,* he added, *they feed the bodies to the sharks.* I couldn't see us, but I doubted we gave him much reaction. We'd been hearing the stories for a while. Morocco had started deporting illegals when European countries complained that they were getting more people than they wanted shortly after we arrived in the country. When that happened, Nouadhibou became the city of unwanted people who were formerly people with dreams of functioning watches, undented cars, and supermarkets and lacked money to return to wherever they came from. I thought that desperate described them better than crazy.

We stopped at the dilapidated lighthouse where the Sahara ended. The cliff that raised the lighthouse about a hundred feet above the ocean dropped to a beach that dwindled toward an ocean liner listing in the sand that mocked the cliff in sheer size. *Oh my god*, I said aloud to no one in particular even though Amanda was standing there. *I'm getting closer*. Amanda started down the embankment with me, and then stopped. She said, *I think I'll actually stay up here. I can see fine*. I didn't understand why she didn't share my interest. Everything about the scene was familiar—the Sahara, the Atlantic, and a ship. But the distance that I had to travel to get there, that I could travel no farther, and that such an enormous machine punctuated the beginning and the end . . . I couldn't finish my thought as my neck gradually folded backward as I approached the ship. In faded stenciled letters someone had named it *Guadalupe*. I thought the saint-name a failure. Not only was it beached, but rescuers would have needed a helicopter to reach the crew. It seemed a lot of work to throw away a ship. Waves battered it and curtains of rust seeped down its white paint. Sand had buried the rudder.

Amanda remained above as I decided to explore between the malted milk cliffs and the black surf rocks where waves gurgled in crevices and pockets. The water that I had to wade was cold. Eventually, I reached a small cave. Neon algae colored the entrance and faded as the cave entered the shade under the cliff. There waves collided with rocks and sprayed me. I could go no farther; the cliff was too steep as it exited the cave. I wondered at an experience that was all-my-own; one that I could share but would not need to. As I listened to the ocean, my excitement faded with no one to confirm it. I realized that my eyes alone were not enough. Experiences grow in intensity and are impressed twice as hard if shared by a second pair of eyes. But the only other pair available was in use elsewhere. I climbed up the cliff by a rope someone else had secured there. I didn't find Amanda, so I followed the edge of the cliff where the sliver of beach disappeared and the Atlantic battered the Sahara.

The server returned for our orders. She stood silent, stiff, and pretty. Her hair was straight and short, cut so that it hid her ears but not her silver ear rings. I admired the subtlety of her dress, paisley and cream. Her eyes looked observant. A pad of paper waited in her hand under a pen and her other

expectant hand. I thought that perhaps she was thinking what I thought sometimes when I worked as a server when I saw two people such as us: *This couple is miserable*. I imagined she was listing reasons why this might be and who was to blame and whether or not there was hope for us. Then I thought that her mistake was understandable. We were similar in age and appearance and speech. While none of these similarities precluded that we were a couple, I imagined that she was thinking it seemed likely. In fact, I wanted to tell her, we weren't even on a date. We were just two people sitting in the same location at the same time who weren't sure that they wouldn't be happier alone. Most likely, though, she wasn't interested in us at all. I thought that people often think that they are more present to others than they actually are, and this was the mistake I was making. Instead she was probably thinking that she wished we would order because she had other things to do, although considering the empty restaurant, those things were necessarily few but inclusive of everything that excluded serving us. Perhaps she was nicer than I would have been and was thinking that we should take our time and that choosing food to eat is an important decision that could determine the tone of the rest of the night.

We ordered without enthusiasm, and the server walked away. I returned to my thoughts instead of Amanda. I decided that it was impossible for me to know with any certainty what the server was thinking even if she told me. Even my own thoughts, I thought, were often veiled as fickle emotions and circumstances that have a way of corrupting what I might have thought in a vacuum. In the case of our server, it was inappropriate to speculate, I thought, to insert meaning behind a pretty face or any face for that matter. But what I thought she was thinking was just more interesting than my current present. Later, I realized that if I would have shared these thoughts with Amanda, we might have enjoyed a conversation during dinner that might have sparked more conversations that night. Instead, after the waitress disappeared behind a decorative blind where the servers' station was located, I asked Amanda, *What do you want to do tomorrow?*

Amanda's eyes looked up in thought. *Sleep in*, she said. I agreed. *After that?* I asked. Her eyes moved to the painting of a light-brown man in a Chinese rice-straw hat milking a black cow in front of a snow capped mountain above our table. *I don't know. What do you want to do?* I frowned at Amanda's

lack of an opinion. I was already tired of our conversation. Amanda asked what there was to do. I repeated some other things Mark mentioned. *I'm up for anything*, Amanda said, *as long as I have some time to relax*. The conversation stalled. We tried to talk a little about school, but we mostly sat in silence until the food arrived. It was unremarkable. We ate and paid. Once we were on the sidewalk, Amanda ripped the heel cups from her sandals and left the pieces on the sidewalk so that she could walk back to Mark's.

We decided to leave the next morning. I don't remember how we decided that, but I think we were tired of traveling and tired of each other. At the taxi garage for Nouakchott, drivers swarmed our city taxi. We got in one and drove down the road to negotiate. We arranged seats next to a young Moor with a pockmarked face and wandering teeth, who spoke more English than Hassaniya or French. His name was Moustapha. He was Swahari, a Western Saharan refugee, and proud of his cell phone. His parents were dead and his brother didn't want anything to do with him. As if to compensate for his loneliness, he talked most of the way to Nouakchott. He told us about his plans to develop an off road race like the Dakar Rally through the Western Sahara and Northern Mauritania. It would make him rich, he said. At that moment, though, he was going to Akjoujit to find work in the gold mines. He hoped we were going there too because he'd never been and knew no one in town.

Outside of Nouadhibou, the driver picked up a sixth passenger. The man handed over his money and squeezed in against the driver's side door. Moustapha protested the best he could in Hassaniya, and then he looked at me for support. *How can he add another passenger? He's risking our lives for a little more money. It's not right*. I admired his willingness to complain. Too many people resigned themselves to the injustices of Mauritanian life as if they were a slow moving dune that buried us more every day. Hope was heroic. It lay in the phantasmagoria of magic lanterns and djinns towards which arms flailed, grabbing at the distended and shrunken images of prosperity worn by tourists, flouted by government officials, and beached on the sand, rotting in the Baie du Levrier. It seemed hopeless. When we reached Nouakchott, only an hour later, he asked where we were staying. *At a hotel in Tevragh Zeina*,

I told him. He nodded silently. I knew that he knew that it was one of the wealthiest quarters in Nouakchott, and that he would be alone again. The driver let Moustapha and his phone out at the main roundabout where he jumped into traffic to catch a ride. When we left him, arm outstretched, thumb hailing oncoming cars, I appreciated Amanda more than I had the entire trip.

Chapter 10 – Clean

Chapter Summary

After Nouadhibou and the summer break, I return to Kankossa for my second year of teaching and the wet season. My sudden proficiency in Hassaniya surprises people, which changes how people interact with me. They no longer assume that I cannot communicate, and I find the relationships much more satisfying. In addition, there are two new volunteers whom I help settle in, which shows me how much I had developed as a volunteer. Through my work with the new volunteers, I meet a beautiful Mauritanian girl who takes interest in me. This flirtation increases my interest and awareness of relationships between men and women in Kankossa, which, I discover, are more complicated than I learned during training. The chapter's main narrative follows this story.

Underlying it are new complications with teaching. The high school is undergoing renovations, so we must share classroom space with the elementary school, which requires us to teach during the hottest parts of the day. More immediate, however, are the municipal and national elections, including a run-off, scheduled for October 2006 and March 2007. The concurrence of the two creates pandemonium. I arrive at school the first day of the semester to find soldiers with machine guns guarding the entrance. After talking my way into school, I find more soldiers in the classroom in which I am supposed to teach, sleeping on the floor, using it as barracks. This persists until November. Surprised by my free time, I focus on spending time with people and two projects that I planned for my second year: restocking the high school infirmary and starting an English Club.

Chapter 11 – What Remains

Ginger and I were walking to Agmamine to visit Caleb's remains. It was mid-morning on the fourth day in February. The elections were distracting much of the country, and few people were actually working, so we thought the time was right for the visit. The damp air collected the sunlight and dulled the sharpness of the breeze. Our sandals squeaked our pace. We focused on the uneven sand.

We'd had a disagreement about what we'd find when we got there. Basically Ginger and I remembered Caleb differently. He had passed away six months earlier. More accurately, Alioune Kane, his Mauritanian double had passed away six months earlier. Caleb was still alive; he'd simply returned to the United States. But leaving Mauritania is as good as dying. As Peace Corps volunteers, we spend two years in the same place, two years with the same friends and family, two years at the same job, and then we disappear. Some resurrect in garbled, overseas connections or tattered envelopes. A few actually return by other means, non-governmental organization (NGO) work or research grants. Most just vanish. Caleb fell into this last group. He hadn't called or written. I was left to explain to his friends and family why. I didn't know what to say. Alioune Kane had just died.

Ginger's memory of him was as the ideal Peace Corps volunteer. He was her Agroforestry trainer, and she gilded his every word. Peace Corps decided not to replace him. Instead, it placed Ginger across the river from me in Kankossa II. She was visiting Agmamine because she promised Caleb to check on his projects, an homage to her teacher.

My memories of Caleb were positive too. I just possessed a more human memory of him. Caleb had been my closest connection to familiarity during my first year in Kankossa. I

enjoyed visiting him in Agmamine, his perspective and advice, but in such closeness I learned what everyone will learn about someone eventually that he too had his flaws.

My interest in visiting Agmamine was existential. After a year and a half in Mauritania, I could see the end of my service, and I was wondering what I would leave behind. Only a few of my students cared much about English. The African Cup of Nations had killed my adult English class. CerAmine appeared to be another yes-man project that petered when the funding did. Yahya's fruit tree project might survive, I thought, but as its name suggested, it served a small number of people. I was searching for something to justify the Peace Corps's existence in the country and my final two projects, the English Club and the high school infirmary.

On the walk to Agmamine, I hoped to investigate the viability of the infirmary. I was looking for a more permanent source of funds to restock it so that it would remain after I too passed away. The NGOs that worked locally—World Vision and PASK—were my only options. Since the World Vision office was a short detour off the sand track to Agmamine, I hoped to find the director, Mohammed Diagana. He, however, was rarely in his office. When I'd visited previously and didn't find him, employees explained that he was traveling for some meeting or another in one village or another or in Kiffa or Nouakchott. With the previous director, I sometimes questioned how much he actually worked, but Maliam Diallo, who also worked for World Vision as a translator, liked Diagana. He said that he was honest and hard-working, and I trusted Maliam. But with the elections, I thought that finding him was unlikely. If he wasn't in his office, I reasoned, I would return. This project was important to the high school, which had been without an infirmary for years, and it was important to me. It was something that I could use to defend my service to my future self. I hoped to be more than an imitator.

One night in Kiffa, some French volunteers with whom we were eating dinner accused Peace Corps volunteers of being just that. One argued, *You come to Mauritania, you learn the language and the culture, you integrate into the community, but that's it. Your impact is negligible. What has Peace Corps ever done?* We didn't really disagree, but we did challenge them to show how they'd done better. In fact, it was unclear that anyone had. In most Mauritanian towns and villages, evidence of our presence, or any development work, is difficult to locate.

With that conversation in mind, I thought Caleb's fruit-tree project, which he finished right before he left, would measure us. It was his legacy, the culmination of his two-year service. One hundred trees. A new well. A hundred meters of new fencing. The project cost more than any Peace Corps project that I knew of. The local woman's cooperative contributed twenty-five percent to the project, about one thousand Ouguiya per family, which was a significant amount for the small village. He hoped that if the women had a stake in the project, they would maintain it after he left.

A few volunteers, including myself, were skeptical. Agmamine was a place where aid died. For years, organizations had invested in it. The Chinese built a beautiful well that tapped a major subterranean artery. People complained that its water was too salty and allowed children to fill it with trash. Instead, people drew water from the well inside the cooperative garden, which the local NGO had financed, by climbing the chain-link fence. Eventually it weakened enough that cows reached over and ate the moringa trees that the cooperative planted for a windbreak. Frustrated, Caleb tested the water. He didn't taste the salt, so he attempted to raise a

little money in the village to clean it out. Few contributed. Instead they continued to use the cooperative well.

In the 1990s, a Peace Corps volunteer helped the village build a chicken house as an alternative source of nutrition and income, but it too fell into disuse after the volunteer left. In 2006, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) installed barbed wire around the elementary school in anticipation of a school garden. Caleb planted a few trees, but the garden never materialized. The fencing fell apart, and goats ate the trees. On the edge of the village, another aid organization constructed a foot-pump well that also broke while I was in Mauritania. Agmamine had certainly eaten its share of aid.

Caleb had spent his first year priming the community for a large project. He invited his Mauritanian supervisor to the village multiple times to talk about the advantages of working as a community. Everyone nodded their heads while he was there, yet Agmamine reluctantly bought Caleb's vision. Mauritania's characterized by disunity, but this doesn't explain Agmamine. It has been an ethnically and economically homogenous farming community since the first records of it in 1905, forty years longer than other settlements in the area. Uniquely situated where the Karakoro, the seasonal river, pinches to a seasonal lake, farmers plant millet in the alluvium as the waterline recedes, creating a moment of fertility on the edge of the Sahara. Families also garden in separate plots, sometimes in close proximity, yet the idea of sharing labor, sharing produce, and sharing profit, doing what they already do more efficiently as a cooperative, never sparked. Despite this, the cooperative remained because development organizations champion them, so it was necessary to receive funding. Eventually, Caleb won out. He gained enough support to raise fear in dissidents that the coming prosperity would leave them behind. His will was stronger than village's will to resist.

* * * *

The road to Agmamine is a major artery through the semi-arid steppe, tire tracks connecting Kiffa, Mauritania's third largest city, to Selebabi, its southern-most, located in the Y gap created by the Senegalese and Malian borders. The seven kilometers between Kankossa and Agmamine follow the slack between the Karakoro and a parallel dune escarpment, which disappears into the ground just past Agmamine. Through this corridor, doum palms telescope to and expand from the road according to the river's bend.

Even though a truck left daily from Kankossa, in the early evening, when enough merchants and market goers tired of the "city" to fill a truck bed, we chose to walk. It allowed us to arrive on our time. We had to arrive before Magou, Caleb's host mother, started cooking dinner so that we could supplement the meal. Agmamine lacked both a butcher and a bread maker, so we stuffed meat and bread into our bags with potatoes, onions, vegetable oil, and fruit. Everyone ate better; everyone contributed to the meal.

Twenty minutes outside Kankossa in Al-Kharife quarter, we turned onto a path between barbed wire fences. The World Vision office wasn't visible from the sand track, but once we entered the neighborhood, we found it easily. Other than the building under construction that would house Kankossa's gas-powered generator, the World Vision office was one of the few walled compounds in the area. Its own generator rattled throughout the day to power their lights, computers, and copy machine.

Inside the walls, the employees were always friendly. One of Yahya's daughters worked as secretary, and I was friends with another who lived with Moussa. Another had participated in my adult English class. They told me that director was in. *Really?* I thought. I was suddenly nervous. Diagana welcomed us into his office, and motioned to the chairs in front of his desk.

We exchanged greetings. I introduced Ginger; she had yet to meet him. Then I explained my project, and what I needed. He nodded while I talked. When I finished, he said, *I like the idea. I think that World Vision can fund it.* I was shocked. He continued, *The problem is getting approval from the Kiffa office, and I think they'll only approve of it for the needy children.* The news was still encouraging. *So while I get approval from Kiffa,* he added, *you'll need to get a list of all the needy children in the high school.* This seemed manageable. I thought that the school had a list. The meeting took five minutes. Then, he excused himself: *I must get going. My car is waiting to take me to Kiffa.* He shook our hands, and we followed him out of his office. In ten minutes, we were back on the road to Agmamine. Ginger commented, *That was easy.* I smiled. I couldn't help but feel that I'd achieved something. I entertained the thought that perhaps I had been wrong about development work in Mauritania.

As we entered Agmamine, the land spread out before us. Across the river, dead and dying cornstalks shifted in the wind, blurring the ground. The open-faced sky was a larger container for my thoughts, one that I could never fill, reminding me how small I was and how much smaller my troubles were than they felt. Dun-colored houses appeared, as if individual bricks from an improbable tower that had toppled from the dune toward the river and landed as houses, half-buried, in an expanse of leonine-colored sand where villagers once staged horse races. Caleb told me about the horse races once while carrying two water jugs across the expanse from the cooperative well. He never let me help carry one because he said that he liked to feel balanced. His "son," Ahmed Taleb, was riding on my shoulders. He added, as he struggled with the weight of the jugs, that sometimes he felt like Lawrence of Arabia. Then I wondered if that was why he insisted on carrying both.

I only noticed the stagnation of the place when I was ready to leave, and then the weight of dead aid deflated me.

* * * *

Almost two months before Caleb left Mauritania for the United States, he arrived in Kankossa from the national agriculture center near Kaedi with a truckload of trees and gardening implements. He was delivering a few fruit trees for Yahya's fruit tree project before taking the rest to Agmamine. Conversation was brief. We admired the healthy trees and exchanged news. The smile on his squat face belied the strain in his voice: *I've got to go, but if you want to come down tomorrow and help that would be great. I don't know how many women will show up.* Doors shut on the pickup, Caleb buckled his seatbelt, and his driver sped south.

The next morning, I arrived in Agmamine and found the orchard land boiling with activity. Twenty women were attacking the ground with shovels and picks on a treasure hunt. Caleb directed, chided, and flirted, orchestrating everything from the center of the orchard. Some of the women lashed back, and then they broke down laughing to mitigate the tension. I was impressed by how they listened to him. They followed his directions much better than my students followed mine. When he finally saw me, he approached smiling. He had a soft face and flushed cheeks. Brown hair squirted from his under his baseball cap. He handed me his camera. I would be his photographer. I felt lucky to participate in what I thought was a triumph. *Everything's going all right so far, he said. We almost have the holes dug, but I'll probably need your help when we distribute trees. If you want you can start unloading them.*

After taking a few pictures, I carried seedlings two at a time inside the fence, sorting them into varieties: mango, guava, and citron. As the trees accumulated, women started to gather around them. Some moved them into separate, smaller piles. I mentioned to Caleb what

was happening. *Shit*, he said. A murmur grew into loud disagreement. Women rushed Caleb: *Alioune, where are my trees?* He frowned. *We've talked about this. You don't have your own trees! We are planting them together as a cooperative!* The women didn't believe him. One said, *That won't work. We each need our own trees. We can't work as a group. They'll all die.* Caleb's tone stiffened. He backed the women away from the trees. *The mangoes and guavas are going near the river, and the citron will fill the rest of the holes, just like we talked about!* A few women resented his leadership, but fell into line. Once the women focused on planting trees, the tension fell, and they were laughing again. Caleb's attitude also lightened as he realized that he'd escaped disaster. Yet even as we watched the cooperative women shovel sand over the balled-roots of the last guava tree, I noticed that they had marked the trees they'd planted with sticks or strips of cloth they'd torn from their mulafas.

* * * *

We greeted Magou at the edge of her compound where a barbed-wire fence that Caleb had strung once deterred ranging cattle. *Salaam Alekum!* Caleb's house and latrine stood close by. The village had built them as a condition to receive a Peace Corps volunteer. The door to his room was padlocked, hiding what I remembered most about it—the smell of rotten honey from doum-palm fruit. The mixture of cow shit and sand that sealed the exterior walls was cracking. Torn canvas on his small limbar rippled and snapped in the wind. An acrid stench trailed in the breeze from Caleb's latrine, the only one in the village and filled to capacity. Even though all his neighbors used it, I joked with him that filling a latrine by himself in two years was his most worthwhile accomplishment. He usually chuckled and admitted that I was probably right.

W'alekum Salaam! Magou emerged from under her limbar across the yard. She adjusted her thread-bare mulafa to cover her patchy hair, then clasped her hands, and hurried to meet us. She favored her right hip for a few steps before straightening. Her wrinkled face stretched to a storied smile and her eyes projected a festival. I was amazed that this excitement was at least partially for me. She never failed to make me feel loved. I always envied Caleb for spending two years with them.

She continued to greet us, as we walked toward each other: *Oh, you've come, you've come!* We'd sent word of our visit through Brahime, her neighbor who owned a store in Kankossa. *Mohammed, Zeinabou, how are you? How's your health? So nothing's bad, I hope?* Magou's rapid greetings forced us to speed our own. Eventually we just stopped trying; our smiles were too tight to form words.

Oh, you've come! Mini, Ahmed Taleb, Alioune and Aicha have come! Alioune and Aicha have come! Thank God! Magou motioned to her shy grandchildren, who lived with her even though their parents lived next door. Ginger turned to me, *This is so confusing. Why is she called us by Caleb's and Adriana's names? Why is she calling you Mohammed?* I smiled and shrugged. Adriana had spent a week or two in Agmamine the previous winter, so the children knew her well. They knew that we weren't Alioune and Aicha. The children clung to Magou's legs. Maybe she thought all white people look the same.

Mohammed, Zeinabou, how are you? How's Kankossa? How's your work? Come, come! Magou led us to her new house, one of the only cement structures in Agmamine. When her previous mud house collapsed in the rainy season, Caleb's family raised funds through their church to pay for a new one. *Put your stuff in here. Have a seat. Everything's peaceful?*

Thanks be to God! Mini, Ahmed Taleb, come here! Bring the stove and corn! Alioune has come!

We deposited our sandals at the doorstep. The straps left white bands, revealing the dust and sweat that covered our feet. We chose the matelas lining the back wall. I recognized most of them as Caleb's. As Magou arranged things, I explained why Magou called me *Mohammed*. She was the village midwife, trained in some capacity by the government, and since she delivered the babies, she also named them—an honored position because names came from Allah. At the time, I hadn't chosen a replacement for *Dudu*, and I thought I needed one. I could've used my real name, and some Mauriticians preferred it, but others were uncomfortable pronouncing it. It also went some distance to mask my identity. People knew I was different only when they turned to look at me.

So Caleb suggested that I ask Magou for one. She'd given Caleb his, naming him after her father, Alioune Kane. After I asked for a name, I was nervous what she would decide for me and what significance it would bring. She told me it would come to her in the night. Then, over breakfast, she named me *Mohammed*. The Prophet's name seemed like a bad idea to me, and friends in Kankossa agreed that it wasn't appropriate for a non-believer, so I reluctantly changed Allah's choice to Sidi. But in Agmamine, I remained Mohammed although Caleb had to occasionally remind me when Magou called my name.

When Mini and Ahmed Taleb didn't return with the stove, Magou retrieved it herself, scolding them toward the room. She set the stove and a pile of quartered corn cobs down and sat on the doorstep. She reviewed the greetings as if to commit the details to memory. *Why don't you come visit every weekend? How's Alioune? Oh, I miss Alioune!*

She turned the corn as it darkened on the gray-haired coals. We gave her our news while she stacked the cooked pieces on a plate, finally pushing it towards us. Ginger and I each took one and ripped the surface-burnt kernels from the cob. Mauritanian corn is a different breed; it chewed and tasted like driftwood. We ate piece after piece to please Magou, but she kept filling the plate as she talked about Caleb. Finally we told her *Enough! Enough! We're not horses!* But she continued talking, putting more corn on the stove. *Those are for the children, right Magou?* I asked. *No, those are for you. You need to eat; you walked so far! And the sun, it's hot! Mini, Ahmed Taleb, come here! Alioune came! Alioune and Aicha came! Mohammed, Zeinabou, I miss Alioune! How is he again?* This time she actually waited for an answer. Ginger explained that he was in Alaska, a place as cold as Mauritania was hot. *Ugh! Alioune's crazy! But I guess he did spend two years in Agmamine.*

Ahmed Taleb and Mini hid behind the doorframe as if figurines from a Russian nesting doll. *Alioune came! Look it's Alioune, your father.* She pointed to me. I smiled and shook my head. I didn't understand this deceit. I felt awkward trying to be passed off for someone else. I set mandarins on the woven plastic mat that covered the floor. It too was Caleb's. Ahmed Taleb gave in first. He snatched one and slid into my lap in one movement as if into a familiar chair. He smelled of dried sweat and not bathing. His bulbous head brushed my cheek, and his gumball eyes secured mine before he tested the mandarin with his teeth and then tore a patch from the rind.

I imagined that Caleb's departure hurt Ahmed Taleb the most. He started calling Caleb "father" less than a year after he arrived even though his real father lived next door. The village played along; people thought it was funny. He followed Caleb throughout the day: to the fields in the morning, to the cooperative garden in the afternoon, and on his rounds through the village

in the evening. When possible he grabbed his hand to keep up. Every time I visited, he was a fixture in Caleb's room even when he was unwanted, eating marble-sized jujube fruit a handful at a time. And Caleb treated him as his son. He scolded him when he didn't listen and brought him clothes from town. The other children loved Caleb too, but they didn't stick to him so tightly.

Then I noticed that he was wearing pants. His dust-covered legs extended from red shorts. He'd always worn a shirt, and Mauritians accept a certain amount of pantlessness after circumcision, but he'd extended these privileges beyond the norm. Throughout his two-year service, Caleb and Magou tried without success to initiate him into the pants world, even sewing him a pair only to find them crumpled in a dark corner of the house. I wondered what had changed; what finally convinced him to wear pants. I thought that it was an interesting stage of childhood development. Did he become self-conscious? Did he start liking girls and decide that they would like him better if he wore pants? Or was it punitive? Maybe it wasn't as much fun without Caleb to defy. I pointed out to Magou that he was wearing pants, and she said, *I know! Thank God! It's bizarre. Ahmed Taleb is growing up, wearing pants like a big boy.* I asked her what changed, and she replied, *I have no idea. One day he woke up and he had pants on. Who knows what goes on in that big head.*

Mini, who had been watching us in her pink doll dress from behind her bubbly cheeks, followed reluctantly. She was young enough that her stride still appeared very deliberate. She stared with distrust, yet her disheveled hair and crusted-snot mustache made it difficult for us to take her seriously. Ginger scooped her into her lap and handed her a mandarin, which she considered before returning it to Ginger for help.

While we focused on the children, Magou set a board game in front of us. African red, green, and yellow, and royal blue paths wound around toward the center. Action shots of famous African soccer players quartered the board and designated each player's home base. The game was an African version of *Ludo*. As in *Sorry!* players move pieces around the board toward the center by rolling two dice from a small cup. Magou took the game very seriously. It was adult entertainment. She kept her dice-tossing strategy secret, turning away while she shook the cup. When Ahmed Taleb and Mini tried to join, she scolded, *No, no. You can't play. You don't know anything. Ahmed Taleb and Mini don't know anything. Their heads are like rocks.* We smiled at how Mauritians did things differently.

Magou won the first two games and then checked on lunch, or dinner, as Caleb would have said. We continued playing, allowing the children to move our pieces. Mini cried when we stopped to eat. We ate white rice and cowpeas. For dessert, she brought in more cowpeas, boiled in their pods. They were about twice the size of what we'd just eaten. *These are new. I got the seeds from a relative in Atar.* I knew that they were sent by car, but I wondered if she'd been there. It was a three-day car ride from Agmamine, and it didn't seem likely for a villager. She responded, *Sure, I used to live there with my husband before we divorced. I've lived in Kaedi too.* I was impressed that she'd lived all over the country. I knew that she was born in Agmamine and just assumed that she always lived here. I wondered why she returned.

So which is better, Atar or Agmamine? I asked. I took every opportunity to frame questions for Mauritians as dichotomies. Mauritians always frustrated Peace Corps volunteers with this. Not only were we always guests, but we were forced into often uncomfortable qualitative judgments. People frequently asked me: *Which is better, Mauritania or the United States? Who speaks better English, Mauritians or Ghanaians? Who is more*

beautiful, Fatimatou or Zeina? Both was never an answer. Euphemisms and equivocation were unacceptable, but in my mind the answer was always more complex than *yes or no*.

Mauritanians never had trouble with this; the answer was always obvious. Magou replied, *Oh that's easy. Agmamine. I was born here. You always like best the place where you were born. You have family and history. What else do you have in the world?*

* * * *

I'd always observed the fruit-tree project from the outside. When Caleb started it, I'd lived in Kankossa for only a few months and I was desperate to learn how someone survived an entire year in Mauritania, so I tried to learn from him. My first trip to Agmamine, I rode in the bed of a pickup, holding rebar that Caleb had purchased for the orchard well in place on the rough road. A few weeks later, I arrived and Caleb was lounging in the sand where the orchard would be, and the cooperative president, a giant woman in a black mulafa, was cooking tea. Sand was flying in wide arcs out of a hole that would be the well. She immediately asked me, *Hey! Did you bring any meat? You know when you come from the city you're supposed to bring meat!* I lied and told her that I didn't.

In early February of my first year, Caleb and I met unexpectedly on my way to school. He'd walked from Agmamine that morning and was leaving for Kiffa as soon as he could. He explained, *I can't take Agmamine anymore. I've got to get away!* The cooperative president had accused him of fraud. She was preventing construction of the orchard fence and suggesting that Caleb had slacked on his promises.

In fact, Caleb said, she was the one who had embezzled money. After they finished building the well, Caleb had a surplus of cement and ten thousand ouguiya. He decided it should go into constructing a basin in the cooperative garden to hold water from the solar pump. This

idea wasn't new. The previous year, after World Vision completed the garden and installed the solar pump, it provided the cooperative money for a basin. But when Caleb arrived in Agmamine a few months later, there was no basin and the money had disappeared. A year and a half later, Caleb thought this was another opportunity to build one and make use of the solar pump. Weeks after he'd given the cooperative president the money, however, there was still no basin.

Earlier on the morning that I met him in Kankossa, Caleb was determined to locate the money, so he began asking women at the cooperative garden what had happened to it. The women implied that they didn't know where the money went. Finally, one woman said that the president had stolen it and sold the cement in Kankossa. As Caleb was learning this, a vehicle from World Vision pulled up and announced that they would build the cooperative a basin. All of the women cheered. Caleb returned to Magou's compound, found a stick, and batted doum palm fruit into the expanse of sand for twenty minutes, but the violence wasn't enough, so he starting walking for Kankossa.

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Around four o'clock the sun calmed. Ginger asked Magou if we could see her fields in Agmamine II. We crossed the tail of the retreating river where women bathed and washed laundry in the muddy water. A herd of cattle in the distance grazed on water-lily blossoms clustered in the stagnant channel. We followed the footpath up the bank into partially harvested fields. Occasionally we stopped at a lean-to to greet Magou's friends and relatives who were brewing tea in the shade. During the harvest, someone stays at these lean-tos night and day, guarding their crops from birds and livestock. She introduced us as *Alioune's friends from Kankossa* and repeated the news that we'd given her about Caleb.

Soon she pointed to her fields. Rows of cornstalks teetered in the breeze. In separate rows, cowpea pods mingled on their vines just above the ground among their leaves. Magou said that their crop was good, but it was almost done. Her tone softened as she pointed at the bald patches on the ground. *And this was Alioune's field the first year he was here. He planted all of this! Ohhh, I'm missing Alioune.* The field was fallow, only sand and weeds. A few meters down the path, she stopped at another bare section of ground. She sectioned the air: *This was his field the second year. He planted corn here, cowpeas there, and millet right here.*

Ginger asked Magou some agroforestry questions. They talked, and I stared at Caleb's empty plot of dirt. He'd told me that he worked with his family in the fields every morning, but having lived in town I couldn't picture what he was describing. Now that I saw what he meant, I was jealous. My host family had the largest garden in Kankossa. A few times early in my service, I tried helping with the work, but they didn't need me. Caleb was needed.

From the fields to the cooperative garden, the walk was twenty minutes. Halfway to the garden Magou paused. *This is where my house was. I was born here.* She pointed to a smooth clay foundation. *This is where Agmamine used to be. When I was young there was a dispute. Some people wanted to move across the river and formed Agmamine II to live closer to the fields. Others wanted to stay. Eventually a few families left and others moved closer to the dune. This is all that remains. Nothing's changed, though. People still fight.*

* * * *

Five months before Caleb and his cooperative planted the trees, he ate lunch with me at my host-family's house. He walked that morning from Agmamine. Said he'd left in a hurry. His face sagged, and he talked little throughout the meal. Finally, he said, *I think I'm in trouble. I pissed off half the village and had to leave to let the situation cool down. I don't know what it*

will be like when I get back. His face was dirty and streaked in sweat. He drank some water and continued the story. He told me that three days earlier he finally convinced the cooperative president that the NGO that built the cooperative garden agreed to allow them to add fencing for the orchard. He'd received permission weeks earlier, but the president didn't believe him.

That night he called a meeting for everyone involved in the fruit tree project. He announced that they would begin work on the orchard the next morning. He said that he would pay the husbands of the women in the cooperative if they helped. The women insisted that he should pay them to work as well, but he refused. He wouldn't pay the women to improve their own cooperative garden.

The next day both men and women came, and they finished the fence. In the evening, he gave his friend Issa money to distribute to the men who helped. Thirty minutes later, Issa returned with the money. Apparently the cooperative president was demanding that the women receive some of it, so the men just decided to avoid conflict and return it.

Caleb was furious. He refused to allow the president to block his attempt to pay the men since they'd devoted much of their day to the fence. He decided to do it himself. He paid Issa and each of the men. He told them if the women had problems with this to find him.

The next evening, Caleb was visiting friends near the top of the dune when he saw a group of women trudging up the slope to meet him. They appeared to have sticks. Caleb confessed, *I was scared. You know how Mauritanian men like fat women. These women could've killed me, but I wasn't going to let them ruin the project and all the work I'd put into it because of their greed.* From his house below the dune, Issa saw the impending confrontation and hurried to intercept them. He reached Caleb shortly after the women. They were already yelling at each other. One of the women pushed Caleb, but Issa stepped between them and told

Caleb to leave. As he walked down the dune, Issa's wife and Magou were coming up to help. Magou was carrying a big stick.

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The cooperative garden resembled a fenced sandbox. Joined with the orchard, the space occupied about a football field. Each member of the cooperative had her own plots where she grew what she needed. There were three wells, yet only a few plots had been worked. Magou's were sadly bare. *Bad seeds*, she explained. We watered them anyway. It provided us with some hope. Then we watered what was left of Caleb's plot—some moringa trees and prickly-pear cacti. The rickety lean-to he'd built to shade his nursery had collapsed onto the checkerboard of black tree sacks, about twenty-five, each of which at one time held a leafy seedling.

We passed by the well outfitted with the solar pump on the way to the orchard. Few places in Mauritania had such equipment; it was an enigma to find one in a village as small as Agmamine. In theory the solar pump could fill the basin in minutes and the women could fill their watering cans in a few more, skipping the step and effort of actually drawing water. But when I glanced in the basin, it was dry. Magou said the pump still worked, but she didn't know why people didn't use it. Only once she spoke did I notice how quiet she'd become since we entered the garden.

From the well, I could see that little remained in the orchard. I was disappointed that the project fulfilled my expectations. Holes, about three feet in diameter and a few deep, pocked the ground in a grid. Most of them were empty. Ginger counted ten live trees out of one hundred planted six months earlier. Desperate leaves hung from their wiry trunks as if limp sails on the masts of storm-beaten sailboats. The well sat in the middle of the orchard. Around the rim,

Caleb had scrawled: *Corps de la Paix 2006*. We drew some water and drank from the bucket. *The water tastes good anyway*, Ginger said.

Magou's face curled in pain. *Alioune worked so hard on this. People here just don't do anything*. But that was too easy. Laziness was the answer everyone gave when asked about Agmamine's problems. Caleb vehemently challenged it when he heard it used as an excuse. In the morning, the women worked in the fields. They cooked lunch and then dinner. They washed laundry and drew water. They cared for their children. And finally, in the evening, they were supposed to water their gardens and fruit trees. The situation was more complicated, and if he figured it out, he never told me.

I think he knew though. He had little faith in the project from the beginning. The fruit tree orchard represented a new priority that the women had to fit into their full lives. Certainly, after five years of watering, when the trees started producing fruit, the project might have benefitted them. In the interim, however, other needs such as survival were more immediate. Yet he had to do something otherwise his two years in Agmamine would be a waste, and he a mere imitator. Caleb convinced himself that Agmamine needed the orchard; that it would be his contribution to the community. His challenge was convincing the women that they wanted it. Just as they accepted the solar pump and the basin that they never used, they agreed to the orchard that they would never care for. Caleb projected onto the community what he thought it needed, and the community accepted it. After all, if they didn't accept the aid, would they receive any later?

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The evening light brought life as people emerged from their afternoon hibernation. Neighboring conversations seeped into Magou's compound. Cattle lowed and trampled the dust

as they returned from the countryside amid their herdsman's cattle calls. Goats bleated on the periphery, nibbling closer, spying a chance to steal food. Lids and ladles clanged on aluminum pots. Magou sat cross-legged stirring *tajine*—a stew of meat, potatoes, and onions—next to Caleb's limbar, and charcoal smoke dominated the air. Ginger and Mommis, Magou's teenage grandchild, clacked dice against the *Ludo* board in front of the limbar. Younger children crowded to watch before Magou chased them away—*Leave them alone. That's an adult game!* Mini in her doll dress sniffled while she excavated the sand with silver flashlight parts. A gang of boys, including Ahmed Taleb, squealed and chased a flat soccer ball around the house, tackling each other before anyone gained possession. I reclined under Caleb's limbar, watching it all through my camera.

In the soccer game, one of the boys always trailed. His sweatpants lacked a waistband. As they raced around the house, he held them with one hand, but along the backstretch he changed his mind so his pants hobbled him when he rounded the front of the house. He didn't mind so much, but with every lap, Magou ordered him to pull up his pants, which caused him to drop further behind the pack. Only when the scrum piled did he catch up. At this point, though, Magou stopped the game because it had become too violent.

But the boy's problems continued. After the game dispersed, Magou recruited him and Mini to move some trash from inside the compound to the burn pile on the outskirts. They gathered the trash in bowls, which they transported on their heads across the yard. Mini worked dutifully, but again, the boy's pants hindered him. He steadied the bowl with both hands until his pants reached his ankles. Then he stopped, carefully releasing one hand from the bowl and squatting to pull them up. Each trip with the trash bowl was the same. Eventually, Magou sent him home, his pants still yo-yoing.

Night arrived and dinner followed. Magou's "husband" walked into the compound and greeted everyone. I recognized his slow and melodic voice, and his tall silhouette against the moonlight. Every time I visited, he visited at dusk. They chatted into the night when the rest of the compound was silent. He always left before I awoke in the morning, so I knew him only at night.

One day Caleb and I were talking to a man at Brahime's store in Kankossa. I was surprised that the man, whom I didn't recognize, seemed to know everything about me. I played along until he left, and then I asked Caleb, *Who was that? Have I met him before?* Caleb smiled, *Of course you have, that's Magou's husband.* Others in the store nodded. Such an open relationship between an unmarried man and woman was rare in Mauritania. Once Caleb asked her about him and what the village thought. *We're too old to care,* she said. *I'm divorced; his wife died. We're just two old people looking for someone to talk to. Let God decide what's right and wrong.*

During tea after the meal, the children stayed around. Magou relayed the news about Caleb again to her husband. At one point, she turned to Mini: *Where's Alioune? When's he coming back?* Mini grabbed her toes and rocked on the matela. As she looked at them, she whispered confidently, *Alioune's in the city. He's coming back soon.* Magou smiled. *Really? The city? Where?* Mini pointed towards Kankossa. *There!* Magou chuckled and clapped. *Oh, did you hear that? She thinks Alioune's in Kankossa and that he's coming soon! Ehh, missing Alioune.* Ginger and I forced smiles. Laughter was one way to mourn.

At daybreak, Ginger and I squeezed into a truck bed between others heading to Kankossa with sacks of corn and cowpeas. A young goat struggled with its bindings in the corner. As the truck prepared to leave, Magou shoved a sack towards us. *Here, take this. It's for the trip. You*

will come back soon, won't you? Ears of corn and a tangle of cow peas looked up at us. *No, Magou. This is too much! The trip is only ten minutes. We won't starve!* But Magou insisted: *You need them. You must take them! They're for you! You'll come back soon won't you? Greet Alioune for me!*

God willing, we replied. Suddenly, the truck pulled away, and we couldn't argue anymore. Ahmed Taleb and Mini hung on Magou's mulafa as she waved goodbye. As soon as we reached the bend, Ginger and I turned toward Kankossa and leaned against the cab. I was relieved that we weren't walking. I needed to get back to Kankossa. I yelled to Ginger against rushing wind and roaring engine, *What do you think?* Ginger scrunched her nose and squinted into the wind. She yelled, *Caleb has nothing to be ashamed of!* I smiled and nodded. Imitation wasn't such a bad thing.

Chapter 12: Free and Fair

Chapter Summary

As the elections engulf the country, I become more interested in the Bush doctrine and what it means for a country to transition to a democracy. Politics open the old wound of racism, which I had heard about but never experienced, and I become aware that Kankossa is a microcosm of the country's problems when I notice that the market divides it into white and black quarters. In order to pry further into the issue, I visit an older white Moor storeowner that I had befriended who explains the Mauritanian pre-colonial and colonial history that he lived through and his surprising opinion that France solved a lot of the country's problems. Then, I eat lunch with a group of black school teachers and a group of white ones with whom I had developed relationships and push the political issue. What I discover is a chasm of distrust and racism on both sides that partly results from how France 'pacified' the country. This allows me to explore the origins of the chasm, namely slavery, the racial politics of previous regimes, and the 1989 genocide through these visits.

My interest in politics parallels with own frustrating attempts to navigate Mauritanian procedure and politics in order to restock the infirmary and start an English Club. The infirmary proves impossible, but I succeed with the English Club, which I regard as my most satisfying project. Thinking of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which I was reading at the time, I question Mauritania's ability to peacefully transition from a system built upon the cronyism of the tribal system to one that ostensibly values equality among all groups. The presidential elections and a run-off come and go peacefully and the West declares the elections 'free and fair.' Mauritaniens are excited and proud at the West's approval and start dreaming of western riches while I silently observe the continuance of the status quo.

Chapter 13 – Family

We were in a state of tasting in May at the beginning of the hot season. Most new tastes were old ones that we had to learn to endure again: blossoming algae, spindrift sand, desiccated saliva, saline skin. One taste unrelated to season was alkaline. It came one day near the end of May when we all discovered that Mauritania and I had been robbed. Maliam and I were resting on rice sacks the color of nurses' hospital smocks inside the shade of Moussa's empty store. Maliam had retrieved the curled newspaper from beneath tea box bricks, skin cream pyramids, and hair-extension sleeves stapled to placards, lying on Moussa's counter waiting to be shelved. Maliam translated the Nouakchott paper's Arabic script into English. He read that when Zeine ould Zeidane, the country's prime minister, took office three weeks earlier, he found the country's bank accounts zeroed. The new government apparently wasn't "pointing fingers," but no one had admitted fault either. Evidence had disappeared like Christ's bones. Perhaps it was a bank error, some speculated, but Maliam laughed at that explanation: *Everyone knows they ate it!* The outgoing Military Council for Justice and Democracy had paid themselves at midnight after the elections had been decided.

Sidi ould Cheikh Abdullahi, the new president, offered immunity to anyone who returned the money. It was the country's third experiment with democracy, and it couldn't do without. After escaping from under the twenty-five-year Maaoyia regime, this experiment was supposed to be different; people had learned their lessons. Zeidane, a former World Bank employee who'd left a lucrative job for politics, seemed to be a capable leader for the new parliament, but he would not do it without money. He refused to martyr his legacy by attaching it to a bankrupt government, inevitably becoming the scapegoat for the growing food and security problems.

Maliyam shrieked in disgust: *Ugh! And who would blame Zeidane? This is not a real country. It's a collection of tribes with borders drawn around them.*

Moussa clicked his tongue in agreement: *It's true. People don't care about country; they only care about tribe. If your tribe is powerful you will benefit; if not, you get nothing.* The complaint was a familiar one. In Mauritania, nepotism was expected; kinship was paramount. Everyone belonged to a community whether a tribe, a neighborhood, or a family and placed group interests above country ones. When the government failed to provide for the country's needs, which was all the time, community meant survival. There were no rewards for individuals in Mauritania.

That evening and every evening the acacias in front of my house ruined the sunset. I gleaned the colors of the mandarin sunset through the quality of light falling around me. I reclined on my mat on my porch. I noticed that my neighbors laughed more at six o'clock. Bare-chested children raced old tires on the road in front of my house in between men and women shuffling home from the market. Rising and falling lids clapped blackened pots. Charcoal smoke in the warm breeze carried the promise of dinner. It was the time of day that I tasted clean. I had washed the saline from my skin. I had rinsed from my mouth the market sand, a crunch of grey water, rotten vegetables, and goat shit that the sun had dried and scurrying flip-flops had tossed into the wind and into my mouth.

That evening I was congratulating myself before learning that I too had been robbed. I smiled at a daydream that was a memory from earlier in the day. One of my students had asked me if I would be teaching the class next year. He had heard that Peace Corps volunteers only stay two years and that this was my last year. I had previously avoided the subject, but I only

had a few days of teaching left. They needed to know. To my surprise two girls in the front row wailed at the news, as if I were dying. They covered their faces with their arms and sulked on the desk table. One of the students was my neighbor. The other lived on the other side of the lake. Some of the boys suggested that they weren't really crying. I smiled at the girls' dry tears and empty moans. It didn't matter. They were two of the most committed students in the class. They had attended through the elections when we held classes in the afternoon heat and they were a joy in English Club on Saturdays. Their sentiment was genuine. Their wailing filled me with enough self-importance to last into the night. Relaxing on the mat, I intended to savor the rare appreciation until it disappeared.

I had enjoyed only a few minutes before Maliam interrupted my daydream, greeting me from across the yard. He mentioned at Moussa's store that he might come by to pick up his money. He labored through the sand in dusty, black sandals and western dress. He always greeted me as if I were essential. *Oh, yes, Jeremy, my good friend!* His entire face smiled. We slapped hands, locked fingers, and snapped them, a traditional Mauritanian handshake. He held on to my fingertips as my hands fell to my side. He appeared tired. I asked him about his day. *Oh, I was so busy. I went to World Vision this afternoon, but they had no car to return me to town so I had to walk. It was so hot, and I have so much to prepare before I go to Kiffa to send some money to Djeneba and my son.* I invited him to sit on the mat while I retrieved it. *Oh, yes, thank you. I need to sit down. I am tired!*

I had been storing his money in my lock box for the last month. The evening he asked me to do this for him we were drinking tea at his house. Into the second glass, a man called to him from behind his compound wall. Maliam appeared irritated and dismissed him quickly. When he returned, he explained that the man was asking for money. *Every day!* he said. *I walk*

through the market, and people ask me for money. I am at school, and Ali, the school's guardian, asks me for money. I am sitting drinking tea at my house, and people are asking me for money. I am just tired of it! They tell me that they only need a little, but if I give a little to everyone who asks, I will have nothing!

I endured the same thing. Many Mauritians failed to distinguish me from money. Early in my service I often felt honored to eat at an acquaintance's house only realize that their generosity was only a ploy to exploit mine. I had come to realize that everyone in Kankossa had a cooperative garden and everyone wanted a well because NGOs had given wells to cooperatives in the past. For Maliam, though, the requests were worse. Islam's fourth pillar, *zakat*, or charity, encourages Muslims to give when they can, but it's often abused. Mauritians sometimes interpret charity as an obligation of the wealthy to the poor, and the tribal system exacerbates the pressure on the rich to distribute their wealth. Often their positions within their tribes depend on how others perceive their wealth and generosity. If they fail to give enough, they risk being shunned. Although Maliam lived comfortably as a teacher and a translator for World Vision, he was responsible for his wife and child living with her family outside Boghe in addition to his mother who lived in Dakar. I knew Maliam to be a generous person, but he couldn't afford much charity. The community, however, believed he was wealthy because he worked for World Vision, a western NGO. If I kept his money, he didn't have to lie to those he couldn't help.

I patted my table searching for my headlamp in the muffled brightness that showed through the growling red curtain that had swished back over my door. Otherwise my house was dark because that morning I had closed and locked the window shutters. They were my only means of regulating temperature. The small kitchen windows stayed open through the night so

that warm air replaced the hot. In the middle morning I closed them when sunlight scattered through the trees. If I did this my house remained tolerable, around 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

When I found my headlamp, the combination lock on my trunk hung like an eighth note. I thought that I must have forgotten to lock it. I had turned careless after living in Mauritania for two years without incident, at least one that I was certain of. A few times I had returned from vacation to find less money than I remembered, but I always blamed myself. It was a counting error or faulty memory. My camera and CD player hadn't disappeared, and the amount was so small—ten or twelve thousand Ouguiya, about fifty dollars—surely I miscounted, I had told myself. After the second time, I started recording how much I deposited and withdrew from the trunk to ease my paranoia. The system also solved my counting problems.

I shuffled through the money with an accountant's fingers, separating Mauritanian Ouguiya (OU) from West African CFA. I started to count out Maliam's 6000 OU but only reached 4000. My throat tightened. I had 5000 OU in the trunk before I added Maliam's money. I checked my memory to the tally sheet. I searched through the CFA. Perhaps I mixed the two, I thought. But I wouldn't have mixed them. I was creating excuses. The air in my house suddenly became old and thick. Maybe Maliam gave me less money than I'd written down. I walked outside to ask him, but he remembered the same amount. My face must have revealed my anxiety: *Is everything alright?* I needed more time to consider what had happened: *Yeah, no problem. I just miscounted.* I retrieved the 4000 OU from the trunk and added 2000 from my wallet. This is my problem, I thought.

I handed Maliam the cash. *Jeremy, why are your hands shaking? What's wrong?* I created another excuse, telling him it was just the heat, but he refused it. *Do you have enough money? If you need some you can keep this.* I had to tell him. He was my friend. He would

worry. *No, that's not it. I'm just missing a few thousand Ouguiya. I probably missed placed it somewhere.* He peered at his money. *You should take some of the money then. I can send some to my family later.* He always tried to fix things. I assured him that money wasn't a problem; that I had a lot of CFA so that I could change it if I needed. His lips pursed and then he asked the question I'd evaded for two years: *Do you think it was a thief?*

I had no other explanation, but I didn't want him to feel responsible. *No, no, it was my mistake. I'll find the money in my trunk somewhere. Anyway my camera and all of my CFA are still there.* I was trying to calm myself as I was reassuring him. *I always keep my door locked. A thief would have to break in. You can see that it's not damaged.* I kicked the rock propping it and swung it closed to show him the front. The corrugated metal door was actually in terrible shape. Any adult could have ripped it from its hinges, but it looked as it always had. *I'm sorry that this has happened, Jeremy. Tell me tomorrow if you find the money. I must go now; I still have some letters to translate. Have a good night. If you need to you should sleep with Moussa's family. It would be better anyway.* I thanked him for his concern, but I dismissed the idea of sleeping elsewhere. *I'm sure I will find the money. I will probably find it right after you leave.* He stepped over my barbed-wire fence and followed the path between my compound and Moussa's that was studded with rocks and decorated with trash. Lately some neighborhood children had decided it was a good place to shit.

I was always a little self-deluded. Peace Corps taught us about some of the dangers of living in Mauritania, but I thought they were what happened to other people. I was a volunteer. I sometimes underestimated Mauritians. I was a man and less vulnerable, I thought. Living in Kankossa was a process of crushing my invincibility. Early in my service, I left my door

propped open over night to cool my house. I believed that my sleeping presence twenty feet away would deter any thief, or that I would wake up, but sheep taught me this wasn't true.

I learned this lesson when one night a thunderstorm woke me. This was the second storm to pass through that night, and I had lowered the side flaps on my limbar to keep the rain out, and the inside was totally dark. I smelled wet animal, and then, by my headlamp, I saw a sheep's ass flattened against my mosquito net. I found another five squeezed under my roof. I yelled and slapped at them, and eventually I chased them into the rain. But I woke up three more times to the smell of wet sheep. I decided that if I didn't deter or hear sheep huddled next to me, my presence wouldn't deter thieves either.

A teenage boy from the countryside challenged another of my delusions. I was passing the afternoon at Kouthalla Traore's mechanic garage. A boy, whom I'd seen there before, was listening to our conversation with adult interest. Town life amazed and intimidated him, but I was an American. He busied me with questions, more interested in facts than explanations. *Do you live with a family? Where do you sleep? Aren't you scared to sleep alone? Why aren't you scared?* I thought the answer was obvious: *Well, because I'm a man. What should I be afraid of?*

My answer wasn't entirely sexist. Women in Mauritania suffered far more from sexual harassment than men. My predecessor, Annika, slept at her neighbor's compound at the end of her service because a man visited her in the night. She was sleeping in her mosquito net in her house with the door open because sleeping inside was unbearable during the hot season. She woke to a man fumbling with her mosquito-net zipper. The incident ended quickly: she screamed, and he ran. But other female volunteers had told me similar stories. One woman was even gang raped. But men never experienced these problems that I knew.

The boy's eyes flashed. *I would be scared. There are plenty of things to be scared of in the night. Wild dogs steal children right out of their family's tent. Djinn choke men in the night. Thieves sneak into your tent and steal money and your cell phone directly from the clothes you're sleeping in! Mauritania's a dangerous place at night. During the day no problems, but at night . . . OOOO! Watch out!* I laughed. But that night mysterious sounds began to poison my sleep.

It wasn't long until a man visited me in the night. Before first light, I woke suddenly to the bare back of a giant man sitting under my small shelter on the wood platform that I used for a bed. He was silently massaging his left foot in the dull beam of a silver flashlight. Cracks splayed the sole like dry mud. I remained silent. I began organizing my fears as if they were peas, tuna casserole, and applesauce on a child's plate so that nothing touched. My chest hollowed, my breathing stuttered, and my limbs shook. I smelled his heat radiating from his skin. Acknowledging them all seemed to trigger other responses that worsened as I became conscious of them. I tasted nails. He hardly seemed concerned with me. *Why the hell is he massaging his foot?* I thought. He pressed with both thumbs below his forefoot. I wondered if he heard me thinking. I reached for my phone and found it where I'd left it. He must have just arrived, or he wasn't a thief.

I decided to act while I owned surprise. My problem was that I was trapped in my mosquito net, which I had tucked under my sleeping pad. I needed to open a hole for escape without alerting him that I was awake. Slowly, I rolled to my side fearing the platform would creak and pulled the net from my pad and parted it where the two halves overlapped to make a door. Once I'd prepared my exit, I turned to the man. I needed to scare him so that I could put

distance between us. He was twice my build, but I was his height. Maybe in the dark, I would appear large enough to deter him. Maybe he didn't know his size.

I decided to greet him. If nothing else it was something he would recognize. Maybe he would reconsider whatever he was planning. I propped myself with a shaking arm. I filled myself with air. The pressure amplified the arteries thumping in my ears; I wondered if he could hear them. *Salaam Allekum!* He jumped and collided with the shelter's transom. He sucked his teeth, and ducked out of the shelter as I'd rolled off the platform and out of the shelter. I ran to confront him. He was already walking away, stumbling into his shoes and fighting with his shirt. I chased after him in my boxers, my chest leonine. *What do you want!* I asked. *Nothing. I don't want anything*, he replied in retreat. His fear emboldened me. I asked him again, but he had started to run. My feet were bare so I decided not to chase him.

I returned to my porch where I tried to decipher his intentions. My thoughts scattered as if baby spiders from a broken egg sac. I thought that he could have killed me with little effort. *My god, why was he massaging his feet?* Perhaps it was how he relaxed before he committed his crime, imaging how he would react when I struggled. Maybe it was a ritual. A sexual fetish. I paced. I'll wake Moussa or Yahya, my host father. I'll go to the police. The bureau was twenty minutes away. I'll follow him, stalk him to his house. I'll be the predator.

After I dressed and put on shoes, I examined the ground around the shelter. His shoes were distinct. They were the plastic, rigid kind that shepherds wore in the countryside to protect themselves from thorns and cockleburrs. They made deep, grid patterns in the sand, but darkness absorbed the light after ten feet. I would only have that much time to react if he attacked me, I thought. I walked in his foot prints, replacing them with my own. A few paces down the road they indicated that he'd stopped running. I thought I could overtake him. My muscles spiked

under my skin. My eyes waded through the dark. My footsteps whispered caution. I likely wouldn't hear him. The sand echoed and muffled noise. My footfalls seemed to double. I whirled. He wasn't behind me. The darkness animated shadows; trees crawled over the sand. I imagined the bread oven I passed on my right a secret cave. I passed compounds of families I knew. Yahya's fence emerged on the left. I thought they would help if I needed them, but I didn't think that I needed them yet. A donkey brayed in the distance and emptied my veins. I wanted to run, but continued to walk, replacing his footprints.

Shortly after Yahya's compound I found his silhouette sitting on a bench in front of a small store. He was absorbed in massaging his foot. He didn't notice me approaching. His face sweated under tufts of beard. His clothes engendered pity. *You!* I startled him again. *You were in my shelter. Why were you in my shelter?* He fidgeted on the bench, but didn't stop massaging his foot. *It wasn't me. I wasn't there,* he said. I looked at his shoes and then his flashlight. *Yes, you were!* He denied it again. His face contorted in pain, and I understood. He transformed in my mind from a potential rapist to an impoverished night traveler. I thought that perhaps he was tending his animals when he learned that one of his children was dying, and he couldn't find or afford a vehicle to take him. I approached him and examined his calloused foot. His shoes had rubbed blisters in three different places. I asked him if his feet hurt. He nodded. Then I offered him my sandals, and suggested a trade. Or if he didn't want to give up his shoes, I was close enough to my house that I could return barefoot. He refused my offer. I told him goodnight, and returned to my house feeling brave.

I sought advice the next morning. Initially I was undecided about reporting the incident to the police. I knew that traveling at night to avoid the heat was common in a nomadic culture. I walked into the market to ask Moustapha, the white Moor shopkeeper. He listened and shook

his head: *No, only people with bad intentions enter a stranger's shelter at night without announcing themselves. He was definitely a thief. You must tell the police. A thief is a danger to the entire community.* He was right. I would report it. As part of the community, I would report it.

That evening, Ousmane, Moussa's older brother, found me at my house while I was enclosing my shelter with chain-linked fencing that I had purchased from Yahya. He mentioned that his mother saw me arrive with the police that morning. I told him what happened, and he was immediately concerned: *Why didn't you wake us up? You know that your problems are our problems. We're neighbors! There are three men at this house. We would have beaten him!* He punched his fist into his hand. Then he paused and asked, *What did he look like?* I described his features, and Ousmane chuckled, *I know him. That's Hamed. He walked through our compound three nights ago. When I asked him what he was doing, he said that he was preparing to pray, but it wasn't time to pray. He's a little crazy. Harmless though if you're a man, but he does like women.* He paused and acted like he was leaving. *You know that you can sleep at our house any time. My mother doesn't know why you aren't already. You wouldn't have to worry about anything.* He looked at me expectantly. I thanked him, and said that I would try the fence first.

After Maliam left, I realized that I hadn't actually counted my CFA. Arteries in my head stabbed me in 1/4 time. The money meant more than the money. It would determine my personal security, which I'd done so much to ensure. I'd locked my door and walled myself in. I had befriended my neighbors who spied on me constantly. Most of them, however, were no longer curious about me but concerned about my safety. Everyone in town knew they were

watching me. I thought I had mastered Kankossa, but I never acknowledged just how exposed I was living alone.

I counted the CFA and found a month's salary, almost two hundred dollars, was missing. My memory retrieved in painful clarity all those times when I thought I'd miscounted. Only ten or twelve thousand Ouguiya each time. An amount that I could find an excuse to hide. Now I was bitter at my self-deception. I had been in concert with the thief the entire time. The deal was convenient for us both. As long as he stole small amounts, just enough to avoid suspicion, and left my electronics, things that I couldn't miscount and that he couldn't sell because they obviously belonged to the foreigner, I didn't have to be paranoid. I could ignore that I slept outside, vulnerable to any passer-by.

Throughout the evening into the next morning I tasted batteries. I slept with a metal spoon. I lay on my sleeping pad and listened until I sweated in the lingering heat. When I finally slept, I awoke in a theatrical moonlight to sounds I thought the thief might create—shushing branches, compressing sand, and whining metal—that caused my heart to thunder. I paced my yard with my metal spoon like an anxious dictator, throwing rocks and sticks into shadows and trees. When I finally returned to the outline of myself on my sleeping pad, I felt guilty, having failed to protect myself. Many times my director had advised me to bar my windows and to replace the front door, but early in my service the chore of organizing such a project intimidated me. Later I thought it unnecessary.

I slept just under the surface of consciousness and scavenged my mind for likely faults in my home security. Surely, I thought, the windows and doors were the only possible entrances. I left the windows open at night. A thief could easily crawl through, but this posed a new problem because while they were probably open for this last theft, for other occurrences, when I was

travelling, they were closed. I was befuddled. Perhaps the thief was a djinn or a magician like that teenage boy said. Or perhaps he knew my house better than I did. I agonized over where I went wrong—what I had overlooked, what I had ignored. If the theft was my fault, I could prevent it from happening again, and I still controlled my security and could prevent the oncoming entropy. I was sad to remember that I was happy only hours earlier and that at least some of my students appreciated me. I was scared to think that I might leave Mauritania with this battery taste in my mouth. I despised the unbridled siblings: happiness and despair.

The next morning heat choked me at seven, and guilt inspired me to solve the theft. I thought it a counterbalance to my stupidity. I circled the house looking for footprints. I examined the windows in the unoccupied partition whose frames were falling out only secured by ropes or wire. Inside I examined the door and lock between the two partitions. I looked for dirt clods from ladders that the thieves would have needed to slip through the hole above the door. I searched the empty partition for footprints. Finally I checked the windows in my kitchen that I often left open overnight.

I had squeezed through one early in my service when I locked myself out of my house before I got a combination lock. I pushed against the shutters. I raised and lowered the bolts. I tested the turnpieces that secured the bolts. I decided that it wasn't likely that I accidentally left one unlocked. Finally I opened a shutter to examine the window frame. I saw bright sand through the hole in the wall that held the bolt. Immediately I locked the shutter and sprinted to the side of the house. Initially the hole blended with the rest of the scars on the wall from animal horns, but I noticed below the window frame that the daubing had been scraped away, exposing the hole that secured the bolt that secured the shutter. I poked a finger into the hole, and felt the

bolt. I added my thumb, and I discovered that I could grip it enough to unlock the latch. I pushed further with my index finger and the shutter opened. The one in the back of the house worked similarly. The thief did, in fact, know my house better than I.

The discovery freed me from a month of paranoia. Yahya, my host father and landlord, could replace the daubing that day, and I would be secure again. I rushed to his compound only to have just missed him. I started for the market to look for him. Even in retirement, he spent his mornings there in front of his old veterinary office recycling the local and world news with old friends. I caught him before he turned the corner that would take him out of sight. He walked as if a mischievous child had glued his joints while he slept. His resplendent white dara'a waved according to his deliberate steps. I greeted him, and he paused for me to catch up.

Standing next to him I stared down at the top of his white skull cap, which, in addition to his snowy beard that collected from stubble powdering his cheeks, created the northern and southern poles of a miniature globe. In between, his wild eyebrows were frosty ridges and his eyes glacial lakes. His nose rose to a peak and his lips cut a mountain gorge. I told him about the theft, and how the thief entered the house. He chuckled, *Well, what do you expect if you leave your windows open? What do you want me to do?* I felt as if he handed me a boulder to carry, but I had expected it. Yahya abided by strict a cause and effect ethic. But I blamed myself as well. I admitted my guilt in exchange for a commitment to fix the windows to prevent it from happening again. He gazed ahead: *Sure I'll patch the windows.* He stopped walking. *Will you go to the police?* I hadn't decided. It seemed like a lot of trouble over a problem I created and a problem that I was solving. The words stumbled from my mouth. His face clenched, *Well, don't. It will just be a waste of time and disturb the neighborhood. You left the*

windows open. I reluctantly agreed. Police presence would only prolong and add to the embarrassment that I desired to forget.

I continued to Moussa's more confident of my guilt. I dreaded telling another Mauritanian because I expected a reaction similar to Yahya's, but I had to tell him. He was my neighbor and best friend. I found him lounging on the bench outside his store listening to his radio. *What's happening, brother?* I asked if we could talk inside his store. I explained the theft again. It wasn't any easier the second time. My skin bristled, preparing for his response. I told myself this would be the last time I had to face my guilt and then I could return to memories of my students crying because I wouldn't be teaching them next year. I moved first to deflect his criticism by admitting my fault before he could point it out. He looked angry. *Brother what are you saying? You didn't ask the thief to break into your house and steal your money. This is terrible that anyone in Mauritania would steal from a person who has freely given two years of his life to helping our country! This is not just a problem for you; it's a problem for the entire community.* My eyes moistened, and I found a new pain in my chest. Before I left, Moussa offered to store my valuables in his room if I wanted. I told him not to worry; that they should be safe now; that Yahya would fix the problem.

After lunch, Yahya brought over a pail a third full of cow shit. He dug a shovel of sand and sloshed in some water from a full yellow jug. As he mixed them into a cement, he told me that no one could have gotten into those windows. He was right that only someone my height could create enough leverage to pull himself through them. I explained that I could get through the back window; I'd done it before. I coaxed him over to the shutters and demonstrated my discovery. *You're lying,* he said. *You knocked the mud from the windows yourself.* I didn't

know how to respond, but I didn't have to because he continued, *Only you have a key to your house. Only you can get in. You've known about the problem with the windows all along!* I struggled to explain that I wasn't blaming him, but his anger burned too quickly. Hornets escaped from his mouth while he threw the wet daubing under the windows. *The other two volunteers took the money. They're always in the house. You took the money! You're just trying to blame someone else. You want it all to yourself!* His accusations drove him to paroxysm, and his mind stumbled. In silence he seemed to be catching up to what he'd just said. My eyes moistened again. I felt that my host father had betrayed me. I turned away.

Our relationship had always been difficult. Peace Corps taught me Hassaniya, the language of the Moors, a language Yahya claimed he didn't speak. In fact, he did speak it, but he didn't like to. He resented the Moors for racial tensions that spanned Kankossa's short existence. Most volunteers whom he'd hosted spoke French with him since his first language was Sonike, which only a few families spoke in Kankossa. I knew little French when I first arrived, and through the first year, I dizzied myself trying to learn both Hassaniya and French. I thought once I spoke better French, Yahya would take interest in me, and he would recognize me as more than just another volunteer. But I stayed weak in both. Each night I ate with Yahya, and each night we spoke only a few words. Often I was too exhausted from teaching high school and adult classes to say much more. On other nights I tried conversation, but he rarely encouraged me. He usually concentrated on his radio. Twice he showed me his photo album filled with past volunteers. He named each and recalled bits of their current lives, or the last he'd heard of them. Many of the volunteers sent him money a few times a year, and I soon realized this would

be expected of me. Despite this responsibility, I still yearned for a place in the album. On these nights we spoke a few more sentences.

While my language was failing, I tried other means of gaining Yahya's favor and a place in the family. My first few weeks in Kankossa, I helped out in the garden. Yahya and his family kept the best one in Kankossa. It lined the river which allowed the family to fill plot after plot with vegetables. Fruit trees reached out from the bank, and some trees he couldn't identify—I think this seed came from Sierra Leone. He tried anything new. Every morning I filled watering cans in the river and watered the plots with his twenty-year-old grandson, Idrissa, who seemed to me an action figurine. His plastic stare acknowledged me as another object. He rarely spoke to me or anyone. The work went quickly. I felt that I wanted to help more, but they didn't need me. One day Idrissa suggested that I was taking his job, implying his contribution to the family. I didn't help in the garden after that.

A few times I thought Yahya was taking an interest in me. He once bragged to a visitor during dinner that I taught English in the high school and adult classes in the afternoon. At my first Eid celebration at the end of Ramadan, he pled with me to stay and eat a second course with the family rather than visiting another house. At other times, when I traveled throughout the country, he asked me to visit family members, and always seemed a little excited when I returned, asking for any news.

At the end of my first year in Kankossa, I brought a new well to the family. I thought I was paying my debt to become a member. Across from their garden, they had fenced new sand and planned to grow rainy-season crops and fruit trees. They would need a well. Initially I was reluctant to help. I worried that I would perpetuate the idea that a volunteer's role in the community was to give out money. I also feared that I would offend others who had asked for

help earlier. I rationalized that none of them had a plan or a history of success as Yahya did, which was true. I decided that I was only doing what the community expected of me because people already asked me how much I was paying him to eat with the family, and never believed me when I told them that I was paying nothing. Instead I purchased a sack of rice every few months, but the family didn't ask for it. Most people were simply jealous that I wasn't paying them.

The project required very little from me. I wrote a grant and then watched. Yahya hired neighbors to dig the hole, and then hired extended family from Selibaby to set the concrete forms. I visited the well site a few times, but I never touched the sand. I wasn't needed. The well turned out to be the nicest in Kankossa. The mouth was twice as wide as any in town. The water was deep and sweet. Yahya had one of his grandchildren fetch water from it for every meal. When I returned from summer vacation, I expected a quiet victory, more attention, but, as I walked away from him while he patched my windows, I wondered what happened. He acted as if I was accusing him of stealing the money, but he was only tall enough to look in the windows.

That night a pack of feral dogs kept me awake hunting a desert fox outside my compound. I had eaten dinner at Moussa's to avoid a second conflict with Yahya and returned to sweat under my shelter next to a big stick. As I forced my eyes shut, the cacophony alternated between distended barks of the pursuit and nasal snarls of the scrum as the dogs captured the silent fox, let it escape, and captured it again. I felt trapped inside my shelter. I didn't know whether to concern myself with the dogs or the possibility that the thief might return in the chaos. The throng of aggression drifted closer to my house. Yelps joined snarls as the fox tired and the scrum turned to frenzy. I ducked outside my shelter and swept my headlamp in the

direction of the fight. Eyes flashed as heads tore through the air. I picked up a rock and threw it into the pack. I heard a yelp and a few snarls turned toward me. Eyes glowed and the taste of ink flooded my mouth. I quickly returned to my shelter as the pack resumed the kill. The fox shrilled into the callous night as the dogs locked jaws and pulled in every direction. I tightened the bungee cord securing the fence in case they weren't satisfied. In minutes the night recoiled from the violence, and my ears rang with its absence. I stared into the space above me. My imagination replayed the scene that I didn't see. Exhaustion kept me awake fighting feral dogs into my sleep.

News of the theft had reached town by the next morning. At eight I called Peace Corps with the day-old news. My director reassured me and urged me to report the incident to the police, so I left for the bureau after I ate breakfast. On my way to the market, I received more calls from Peace Corps administrators concerned about me. Through the market friends stopped me and apologized for the theft, reiterating Moussa's sentiments from the day before. Their sympathy flushed Yahya's vitriol from my body and filled it with endorphins. I had never received such affirmation all at once. I thought that the Sahara and poverty had calloused Mauritians to sympathy. No one complained about what afflicted everyone. Few understood my struggles to adjust to life there, but the theft was different. No one was expected to endure that alone. I drank my sympathy all at once.

After a short wait outside the bureau, I faced the police with confidence. Hassaniya flowed from my mouth as if my tongue had always formed it. Two policemen followed me to my house. They inspected it and found no other conclusion than the one I'd given them. They promised to visit money changers in the market to see if anyone had changed CFA within the last

few days. Otherwise, they said, it would be difficult to find the thief. They joked between each other as they returned to the market. I knew they wouldn't find anything, if they searched, but I didn't care. The theft revealed to me how much I was loved.

At lunch Yahya waited until after we'd eaten before he acknowledged me. I had been talking on the phone to the Peace Corps medical staff. He laid on his back reading from the Quran. When I finished, he turned his head toward me. He was already agitated: *Did you go to the police this morning?* His persistence exasperated me. After the love my friends showed me this morning, I didn't want another fight. I scripted the French in my head and answered calmly, explaining that Peace Corps insisted that I go to the police. As I explained this he slowly propped himself on his arm, and then swiftly sat up on his knees. His eyes clenched and his lip sagged away from his teeth, trembling slightly. Before I finished my explanation, hornets were again escaping from his mouth. *You are lying you are lying you are lying!* I shielded myself from his words. They were from someone who didn't love me. I left him enraged in his shelter and went to Maliam's.

I found him on his porch in the growing shade of his house. He was surprised to see me so early into the evening. He made room for me to sit with him. I recalled everything that had transpired since I'd last seen him—the CFA, the shutters, Yahya. My eyes strained to levee tears as I told the story. They burned from exhaustion. Maliam placed his hand on my shoulder. *I am so sorry. This should never happen to you. Yahya's response isn't human. He either did it himself or knows who did.* I explained that I didn't suspect him, but I never considered that he might know who did. Idrissa was the only one in the family tall enough to get through the window, but I always thought of him as quiet and gentle.

Then I remembered that the previous volunteer had warned me that he was a thief. Throughout my service I was always remembering her advice after the fact. She told me a story about how a pair of shorts disappeared from her clothesline one day. Initially she suspected neighborhood children, but one day at lunch, Idrissa was shirtless, and she saw that he was wearing the shorts as boxers under another pair of shorts. She went to Yahya, hoping he would retrieve them for her, and he did. He confronted Idrissa, and once he admitted the theft, he knocked him to the ground and beat him bloody. He returned to his shelter with her shorts, leaving Idrissa naked in the dirt.

Maliyam had heard the story before. He looked at his clasped hands. *You know, Jeremy, there's a proverb in my community that says a father knows his own son. Yahya might not know whether Idrissa is the thief, but he knows that he is a thief. But a thief is still family. It is his obligation to protect him. It is our culture.*

After I left Maliyam's, I returned to my house. Fatimata and Huile, two of Yahya's granddaughters, knocked on my door on their way back from the garden. Their eyes flirted with me. Fatimata offered me a lime. We sat on my porch. I asked them about school and how many times the teacher had beaten them that day. They both frowned. I knew they often got into trouble in school. They were too intelligent to behave. They both insisted that they hated school. I smiled and told them they probably deserved the beatings. Huile stuck her tongue out at me. Then Fatimata pointed to a donkey in my yard near the road and dared Huile to ride it. Huile grinned fiercely. She dropped her limes and tip-toed to the donkey. She grabbed it by the ear and pulled herself up. After it kicked few times, she landed hard on the ground. Fatimata and I gut-laughed. She struggled to her feet and hobbled back to my porch blushing. With a weak

smile, she gathered the limes in her shirt and left. Fatimata stood up to do the same, but before she left I asked her if Idrissa was at the Yahya's. She answered innocently that he had left for Selibaby that evening. I told her I would be coming for dinner.

Yahya and I laid on separate mats listening to his radio and waiting for dinner. What had happened at lunch had passed now that Idrissa had left town. I didn't excuse Yahya for his betrayal, but I refused to allow the incident to taint my relationship with others in the family. We discussed the news and sipped algae-flavored water. Mauritania captured a South American airplane in Nouadhibou that was filled with heroine destined for Europe. The trial of Muslim extremists began in Nouakchott. Zeidane was still considering resigning. It was our longest conversation in months. He even said goodnight. After dinner, I carried my cot over to Moussa's house. His mother directed me to place it where her other sons slept.

Chapter 14 – People Doing Their People Things

When I woke one morning after a sandstorm, I found myself staring at a dead donkey. Spilled urine darkened the sand where it lay outside the chain-link fence that surrounded my limbar. Flies chattered, alighting and taking off. I sighed and pushed against the metka's wooden slats; I was weary of the rain that pattered the triangle roof of cloth and plastic sheeting. I beat sand from my sleeping pad and folded it over my pillow. The bamboo platform exhaled from a long night as I rocked onto my feet. I carried my bed from the limbar, through my house's padlocked door, and into the concrete heat that had remained overnight.

I propped open each of the two exterior shutters in the kitchen, one with a hammer and the other with a perforated ladle, and then drew water from my filter. *Stupid donkey*, I thought as I drank. The water warmed my throat. I drew more, this time letting a bucket catch it while I rinsed the sleep from my eyes and face. After I dried with my shirt, I dialed the shortwave pocket radio and placed it on the table that was wedged in the corner between the two windows. The Big Ben chimes announced the news. *It's O six hundred GMT, and you're listening to the BBC World Service. This is a bulletin of the world news: Clashes erupted today in the Gaza Strip between Hamas and Fatah over control of the Palestinian territories.*

Outside, the sun yellowed the hemmed clouds above my latrine. Humidity gathered under my shirt and absorbed its smell, which leaked through the neck. I doubted that I'd chosen the right shirt. The rainy season was approaching, which brought cooler temperatures, yet after a rain, moisture boiled from the sand and hung in the air. It became something one had to move through. Near the dead donkey, a yearling fidgeted. It backed away as I maneuvered toward the

carcass. Its mother was a parade balloon. Her neck had folded awkwardly behind her, and she was staring walleed at my porch.

I looked to see if anyone was watching. My first thought was to stand the dead donkey to create an appearance of normalcy and console the yearling. I remembered observing something similar in Tinzah. I was returning from Kaedi along the airport tarmac that supported mostly pedestrian traffic. At the edge of the tarmac, in the distance, three boys held a donkey as another mounted to see how long he could stay on. Imitating a real donkey handler, he struck it on its flank with a stick and bounced on its back. The donkey's cooperation surprised me. Most would've been kicking and biting. Moments later I was shocked when the boy and the donkey fell over together, and the boys struggled to stand it again for another rider. It was so recently deceased that I hadn't even noticed. Perhaps, I thought, the one in my yard would be equally deceiving, but its vacuous eyes and paralyzed mouth revealed too much. I couldn't hide death.

On the sand track that passed in front of my house, the clopping and squeaking of flat-bed donkey carts slowed on their way to Kankossa's market. The clamor of women shuffling to town grew louder. Children yelled to other children walking to school: *Look, look!* One of them pointed when I turned to look at them. I suddenly realized the donkey's size. Her mass was visible through the short-leaved acacias that divided the road from my yard. Everyone could see her. She disrupted my invisibility. As a foreigner, I had worked so hard not to be seen.

How the hell am I going to move her? Anxiety magnified the problem. I felt it would consume my day, one of the few I had left, one for which I'd numbered the hours to spend them efficiently, as I had all of the days remaining. Only a few weeks after the burglary, the immensity of leaving was overwhelming. The previous week in Kiffa I had finished the necessary administrative requirements, my final site report and my description of service. I

assessed my work and experiences over two years and turned them into numbers. Classes taught: 11. Number of students enrolled: 299. Number of students that attended eighty percent of classes: 88. Number of students that passed: 80. Work highlights: 5. Observations: 13. Recommendations: 11. Friends and useful people to know: 25. Final thoughts: 3. They were really suggested attitudes for approaching life in Mauritania: *People make the two years worthwhile. Fear is a catalyst for success and failure. Regret is an unexamined mistake.* Everything I learned in three sentences.

But I couldn't deal with the donkey yet. I had to arrange my day. Morning: Organize the contents of my personal life. I had a single morning to decide what to keep, what to gift, and what to throw away. Rather than numbers, these were possessions and memories. Instead of statistics, I would reduce them to piles of my personal life loosely arranged and texturing the floor. Evening: Travel to Agmamine, spend the night, and say goodbye. This process was both a reward and a punishment for spending two years in Mauritania. For months I'd been doing things for the last time. I watered my neheem trees for the last time when an animal solved my fencing and ate them in the middle of the night. I scolded the neighbors behind my house for the last time when they discarded used diapers in my yard as they prepared to leave for the rainy season. I recorded grades at school for the last time knowing that they meant less in determining success than family ties and money. But this was the first time I would say goodbye to friends for the last time. I had hoped these chores would be cathartic, but the donkey lingered beyond the curtain guarding my door. My phone read 6:30. *Moussa hasn't left for the market yet, I thought. He'll know what to do with the donkey.*

Once I organized my day, I walked into Moussa's family's compound. *Salaam Alekum!* I greeted his mother, his brothers, their wives and children, and then turned to Moussa who was finishing some porridge in a dress shirt and slacks. *What's happening brother?* he asked. *Moussa, I have a problem. A donkey died in my yard last night.* He grinned against his tall face. *That is a problem. Do you know whose it is?* I told him that I didn't. *Have you asked the family across from you, the one that has all of the animals? It might be theirs, and if it's not, they'll know who it belongs to.* He rinsed his mouth and closely trimmed circle beard. He tossed his worn market *dara'a* over his head. *You should talk with the family across the road. They know animals.*

We walked out his front gate. He left for the market, and I stepped over the gate of the compound across the road. *Salaam Alekum!* They were a family of black Moors who shepherded animals and worked at the abattoir. Our relationship had been awkward. I had not visited them much, and they never encouraged me to. When I arrived in town, Molly had warned me that their children were many and dirty and malnourished. She tried to have conversations with their parents about feeding them better, but they resented her for it. The children tormented me by relentlessly demanding things. They knocked on my door and asked me for whatever I was wearing. *Nasrani, give me your shirt. Nasrani, give me your sunglasses. Give me your sandals. Give me a magazine. Give me a Bic.* Occasionally they irritated me enough that I lost my temper, and then the game switched to chanting in unison, *Donne-moi cadeau!* which travelled throughout the neighborhood. I usually hid in my house until they left. This game occurred daily for weeks until the children realized that I wouldn't give them anything. Instead, they dug through my burn barrel for discarded treasures, and left them scattered in my yard.

Their tormenting reached its height when one child, an eight-year-old boy, threw a rock at me while I was returning from teaching at the high school. He was the same boy who once exposed himself to Molly while she was sleeping in her mosquito net. After he threw the rock, I chased him and caught him outside his family's compound. I held him in the sand and watched him shrink from my touch. Once he realized that I wasn't going to hit him, he laughed, and I released him. When I approached his parents later that evening, they shrugged and told me I should beat him. They reasoned, *Why should we beat him? He hasn't caused a problem for us.* The next morning, I walked past Moussa's house, and he asked about the incident. He told me the same thing: *If you don't beat him, he won't respect you. It is our culture. We depend on the community to raise children.* I never managed to do that.

This morning they welcomed me. The father shook my hand and asked me to sit down. My relationship with the neighbors had improved two weeks after Caleb left. I was awakened around two one morning by the thump-thump of paws on my chest. Instinctively, I threw them off and searched for my flashlight to reveal the dark outline. The paws pounced again as I turned on my light to see that they belonged to Sam, Caleb's feral dog that he had left in Agmamine. He was a welcome surprise. Mauritanian dogs were rarely friendly towards people because many Mauritians abused them. I never knew how Caleb and Sam developed a friendship, but I benefitted from it as well. I had no idea how he found me in Kankossa, seven kilometers north of Agmamine, but he slept the rest of the morning next to my metka and never left. Like Caleb, I never fed or watered him. He just seemed to hang around to be petted. If I didn't pet him enough, he pawed my arm. Eventually I started catching his paw in a convincing handshake, a trick that he would repeat consistently, which allowed me a break from petting him.

Initially I had to protect Sam from the neighborhood children. Tormenting animals provided children hours of fun. Although I managed to save him from rocks and beatings, he only felt comfortable roaming from my side at night. One day the neighborhood children visited us in my yard, and I performed the handshake with Sam. They were so impressed that his reputation quickly spread throughout the neighborhood. When children learned that he would perform the trick for them, he became a celebrity and could wander the neighborhood without fearing for his safety. A month later, I found him at the neighbors' across the street with another dog. The children told me they were husband and wife. They had found them having sex and demonstrated this with their hands. Soon there was a puppy, and I started visiting the neighbors' more often. On one occasion, Sam became jealous of the attention that I was giving his son, and peed on me. I was furious, and he ran. The women preparing dinner near-by laughed and slapped their thighs. I was welcome after that, and the children didn't bother me.

I explained my dead donkey problem to the father. He frowned. *No, that's not our donkey. Boys, go see whose donkey that is.* They raced across the road. The donkey was excitement in an otherwise uneventful day since they didn't attend school. The yearling backed away slowly as the oldest approached the carcass. He studied its brand carefully and announced, *Ould Bava. You know them, your friend Sidi's family.* The news was a relief. I called Moussa to relay the message. *No problem, brother. They will come for it if it's for Sidi.*

I had worried that a stray animal would die in my yard ever since a calf stood near my porch for three days. When I first moved into the house, the yard was a regular stop on a cattle trail. Bovine caravans silently grazed through in the morning darkness, startling me awake only when one bellowed or used my limbar as a scratching post. When that happened I lay awake and

listened to hooves and shit thump the sand until they left. Sometimes they lingered, and I chased them in the moonlight. I flailed a stick and swatted them, but every time one moved another would stop or run in the opposite direction. Eventually I just gave up.

More than a year later, I found a lonely calf the shape of a ribcage in my yard. It hardly noticed me so I assumed it would disappear as mysteriously as it appeared. I thought this for three days. Once I brought it water in a bowl and placed some foliage under its mouth, but it refused my help. I guessed that it was sick at which point I became worried that it would die in my yard. I thought that I could probably drag the calf somewhere, but I didn't want people seeing me dragging a dead calf around the neighborhood. And if it did die, where would I put it? Far outside of town was the only place for dead animals. I couldn't drag it that far. But I couldn't leave it in my yard. My mind extended my fear to absurdity. I convinced myself that we for the rest of our lives would have to breathe death and live in squalor, and everyone would hate me because I let the calf die in my yard. They would all blame the *nasrani* for ruining their lives. I hoped it would just die in the road or collide with a vehicle so the problem would be someone else's who would know what to do.

On the fourth day, it moved closer to the road. On the fifth it moved again, but it was still in my yard. I didn't know how much longer it would survive, but I thought if it needed food or water, it would find it. That afternoon a neighbor boy, twelve-year-old Mohammed Vall, was standing in my yard with the calf when I returned from teaching. *Hey, Jeremy, do you know who this calf belongs to?* He said a word before *calf* that I didn't understand. I asked him what it meant. *You know*, rubbing his eyes, *it can't see. What?* I asked. *Watch.* He made some noise and stomped behind the calf. It startled and darted head first into the cement and rock lip of the dry well in my yard. The collision echoed from the hole and staggered the calf. *See!*

Mohammed Vall was very pleased with himself. We both chuckled. *Don't worry*, he said, *I'll search for its owner*. That evening a herd of cattle passed on the road, and the calf was gone. I hoped the donkey would disappear in a similar manner.

The day seemed lighter since Moussa promised to take care of the donkey. I listened to the news while I ate breakfast. The *BBC* spent most of the broadcast analyzing the fighting between Hamas and Fatah. Everyone agreed it was bad. One of the interviewees cried. It was the first time I'd heard anyone cry on the radio. I believed him. My imagination provided a tired, serious face to accompany the voice, but I decided that I couldn't imagine his sadness. I was able to turn off the radio and escape the dying.

I began sorting my personal affairs. Since my house, the *Maison de Passage*, had been a Peace Corps house for more years than anyone could remember, things left behind had accumulated as if remnants of past civilizations. I managed to use much of the building material—rebar, metal poles, and fencing—around the house, but manuals about how to change the world packed the shelves. I had to create some sort of meaning out of the contents to justify keeping them; otherwise I would burn them.

I sorted teaching materials first. I formed stacks of handouts that I had received in training about how to teach multi-level classrooms, how to manage classroom behavior, how to fix everything that could go wrong in classrooms where the teacher is meant to teach English in English to students who didn't understand English, none of which I'd entirely figured out. But I tried. I sorted through the fifty or so lessons that I'd written or adapted for the Lycee—lessons on the pluperfect, modal auxiliaries, the real and unreal conditional—lessons on grammatical points that I hadn't fully understood until I consulted a grammar book while writing them. I

reread passages that I'd written—cultural texts describing Ramadan or Christmas, environmental texts about the importance of trees, health texts about the necessity of mosquito nets—texts that represented everything we were supposed to teach our students that had nothing to do with English. I smiled at my stick drawings of sunglasses, earrings, broccoli, and a camel, all of which made the students and me laugh because I couldn't draw anything they recognized. Those were moments I enjoyed, times when we all were laughing. I decided to give the lessons to Maliam Diallo, my counterpart. He was a better teacher, but I thought he might be able to use them.

As I sorted, my ears awaited a gravelly engine, disembodied voices, and the groan of truck-bed shocks receiving a load. At eight o'clock I stepped out the door. The yearling bowed over the carcass. I measured her belly with my eyes to determine the rate of internal rot by its expansion. To my eyes, the difference wasn't measureable, but I didn't trust my eyes. I called Moussa again. *They are coming right now*, he assured. *They are looking for a truck*. His answer relaxed me.

I returned to my stacks. I shuffled folders left by health volunteers. I found instructions for building environmentally-friendly latrines. I appreciated their specificity; details reassure volunteers in the way statistics reassure actuaries. They turn people into numbers, and numbers are more manageable than people. The instructions eschewed contingencies: *Dig the pit at least one-point-five meters deep and one to one-point-two meters in circumference. Assume at least six-hundredths of cubic meter of waste per person per year of the latrine's life. Allow one-tenth of a meter where bulky anal cleansing materials such as corn cobs and stones are used*. I grinned and thought, *We don't have to worry about that in Mauritania. The only anal cleansing materials we use are water and our left hands*. The instructions were largely obsolete.

Mauritanians knew how to build latrines, but I decided to keep them. Other volunteers would enjoy their specificity.

Other instructions provided educational pencil sketches demonstrating steps of disease transmission, a cycle of eating and defecating. One series of sketches showed a boy squatting uncomfortably on the outskirts of his family's compound, a small pile darkened under him. Cyclical arrows guided me to the next picture where a fly swooped down and landed on his feces. The fly then transported them to the family's rice bowl. In the fourth picture, the family ate the contaminated food, and the final arrow took me back to the boy squatting. A second picture in the corner of the sketch depicted the boy's death. His skin had tightened, and his stomach had bloated. His head swallowed his body. Underneath his corpse, a bolded statement warned that diarrhea was the number one cause of child death in Africa.

There were folders of similar illustrations, sensibilisations designed to teach Africans about the dangers of AIDS, STDs, malnutrition, female genital mutilation, and contaminated water, all of the African problems that things Western, such as aid workers and education, were supposed to solve. They represented years of repeated efforts that incorporated new technologies, such as translations into Arabic, color printing, more realistic human faces, and positive outcomes with multiracial characters smiling and holding hands, linked sometimes in the shape of a rainbow. Yet the stacks of sensibilisations in my house evinced years of futility and misplaced intentions, or at best small successes. They preached sustainability, but as I sorted them, the older illustrations dissolved in my hands because that was what happened to neglected things in Mauritania. I was hopeful for the country, but I didn't believe the West had any answers. I organized and separated the antiquated material for burning.

At ten o'clock AM, the thermometer read 104 degrees inside my house. Sweat pooled in the skin folds of my stomach as I knelt and dripped over a floor of scattered papers. Itoweled myself with my discarded shirt and shut the windows to the desiccated wind. I entered the foyer and peeked through the curtain. Dead black eyes stared through the sun burst. I felt like I shouldn't mind. *Death happens*, I thought. It just happened in my yard this time, but those were the extent of my logical thoughts. My fears returned and I imagined an overripe tomato, its skin drying and rupturing, slowly releasing death rot into the neighborhood. The curtain swung back over the door as I called Moussa again. His voice was steady. *What? They haven't come? I will tell them. Don't worry.*

I returned to sorting and organizing my anxiety. Some things in the house were permanent and irreplaceable both for their utility and their history. The wood writing table textured by years of spilt candle wax and colored by rich dust from river mud that sealed the roof was a rare import. The wicker-back chair whose seat cushion had been replaced by old pillows made visiting volunteers jealous because sturdy chairs were rare in Mauritania. The house had a collection of unmatched silverware, utensils, plastic cups, and laminated pots and pans intended to serve a crowd that were too many for one person to use. Mostly they just became dirty because of disuse.

There were medical-kit boxes filled with cassette tapes, hundreds to pad years of loneliness. Hippie relics such as Bob Marley, Cat Stevens, and Bob Dylan morphed into the feminist grunge of Liz Phair, Hole, and The Breeders. Many of the ribbons had been spliced and taped. Songs blurred into a bricolage of harmonies and lyrics that created alien combinations of familiarity. They were false friends in a place that surrounded me with the unfamiliar. Eventually I accepted them as they were.

Broken and duck-taped spines filled shelves that lined my walls in the salon. Peace Corps volunteers in Mauritania read lots of books. Regional capitals across the country had substantial libraries that circulated books throughout the country in volunteers' backpacks. Pages fell from most of them as if they were false teeth. We taped them until their original bindings were tape. Books were checks on reading lists and distractions from the heat in the two hours after lunch when no one in the country moved. Volunteers read of sea adventures, arctic quests, and city lights, impossible places in their Mauritanian reality. For some, these distant lives protected them from and substituted for the present. Characters in books were less scary than Mauritians. I read a lot of books in my library, but I hadn't read them all. I was relieved that I hadn't read them all.

Voices, real ones, leaked through the door as I fingered the books. Through the gap between the curtain and the door jamb I saw that the yearling had moved to the shade. I opened the curtain further. Four children were poking the carcass with sticks. They ran when I asked what they were doing. My face flushed. I felt negligent. I imagined neighbors talking about me, wondering why I hadn't disposed of the body. Why the donkey was still in my yard? How long could it take to rent a truck? If the donkey had died in Sidi's yard, it would have already disappeared. I was certain, I thought, that the carcass remained because I was a *nasrani*.

I sorted personal stuff this time—clothes, blankets, flashlights, and water bottles—coveted things that I would give away, but my anger only compounded. I didn't feel like giving anything away. I kicked a water bottle and left for the market to escape my head. But when I reached the road, Mohammed Vall stopped me. *Hey Jeremy, you know you have a dead donkey in your yard? You should probably take care of it, rent a truck or something.* He would have been the first child I hit if I had hit him, but my eyes did the work. *I'm taking care of it.*

As I walked, I focused on the next thing. I needed to reserve a place in the car going to Agmamine with Caleb's best friend, Brahime, and buy food to take with me. I would also visit Moussa's store because that was what I enjoyed doing. I walked to the market by patches of shade. The building materials along the road changed from mud to cement as I got closer. Amadou Barry stopped me at his table as I entered the market. His underbite caused his lower lip to appear as if it were begging. He supported a family of five by hawking brittle gum, shiny-packaged hard candy, Bic pens, braided hair extensions, and fluorescent Chinese trinkets. *Hey, long time! Where have you been? Why don't you come and visit at the house?* I squatted next to his table. I didn't mind him, but he lived too far from my house for me to visit often. He didn't understand this, or didn't accept it. *Oh, you know, I've been busy with school and getting ready to leave. There are so many things to do; it's just impossible.* He gave me a painful grin through his gooey, red eyes. *But I'm your friend. You should come visit me, drink tea!* I agreed. *In'shallah* but he already knew that I had decided and not God.

Toward the market's main intersection, a donkey cart sped through the crowd, the driver sucking his cheek, yelling, and clubbing the donkey across the spine. Its noise competed with fragmented conversations, price haggling, and lewd jokes. A boy sold baguettes stacked like firewood on a board, which he had carried from the oven to the market on his head. I bought some to take to Agmamine.

Across from the bread, Moustapha grinned at me through his beard and waved from in front of his store. His doors stood open. They were dressed in fabric, lengths dyed in orange peel, indigo, and cordovan. The fabric was itself under bulky plastic wares, varicolored drinking cups, makareshes, and children's sandals. He guarded his dark store, which he'd clogged with

goods organized by a tornado. *You're coming by for tea on Tuesday, right? 11:30?* he asked. *Of course, I'll see you then.*

Through the crowds, I reached the edge of the market and turned the corner to Brahime's store. His metal doors were locked. He'd stayed in Agmamine today, which meant that I would have to walk in the afternoon heat. Sweat already darkened my shirt. From Brahime's, I went to the butcher. He brushed a coat of the flies from a round of beef before hacking a kilo from it with his machete. Shuffling feet roiled hot sand, garbage, and goat feces as I walked the vegetable alley. My potato and onion woman carefully weighed each on her scale. She threw other vegetables towards me. *You want any carrots? How about eggplants or tomatoes?* Most of her produce resembled compost.

I passed under tattered cloth awnings, between constricting walls and anonymous doors, and through the smell of aging fish before I arrived at Moussa's. Ali Messoud lounged on the stack of rice sacks inside Moussa's store across from the cluttered counter that Moussa tended. *Jeremy, when are you leaving?* he asked before I could greet Moussa. *Soon.* He grinned with his teeth. *Soon? No, that's not an American answer. That's how we talk. You're an American, we expect an exact answer from you.* We slapped each other's leg and laughed. *Seriously, are you leaving in two weeks? Three weeks? A month? I'm writing a letter for you to take back to Katherine.* I told him about a week. He said he would finish the letter before then, and he stepped out the door, his dara'a a white blur in the sun.

Moussa mentioned the donkey first. *How are you, brother? Is the donkey still there? It belongs to Sidi's brother. Do you know him? He works at the abattoir past your house. He said when he finishes he will rent a truck, but he doesn't understand the rush.* My impulse was anger again. *What? He doesn't understand the rush?* I reminded myself that Moussa was only the

intermediary. Justifications spilled out in rapid English that Moussa struggled to understand, but he agreed. *You are right. It will become a problem for the whole neighborhood if it's not removed.* Moussa understood. I wouldn't have survived Kankossa without him. His radio hissed in the background. I asked, *Have you heard about the fighting in Palestine between Hamas and Fatah.* He said, *I've been listening to it all morning. My heart hurts for them. Muslims killing Muslims. The Quran condemns this. These aren't real Muslims. It's not possible.*

I stepped cautiously around the donkey after I returned from the market. I was unsure of its integrity. The yearling had to be thirsty. I brought it a bowl of water and constructed a plan for revenge if I found its mother when I returned from Agmamine. I imagined renting a truck and dumping it in Sidi's brother's yard. I would then throw sand with my tires as I left. They would have to look at it for hours before they could rent an entirely different truck to haul it away. I thought the whole scenario hilarious and satisfying. Justice. The donkey risked tainting my love of the place. I believed it represented how little people thought of me. I started for Agmamine after lunch.

When I arrived, spontaneous joy from Magou and the grandchildren chased the dead donkey from my mind. She led me out of the predaceous sun to their limbar. She asked her standard questions for which I rarely had new information, but the familiarity of the questions was comforting. Magou shooed Ahmed Taleb and Mini after they brought the tea set, insisting *Mohammed's walked a long way. He needs to rest.* Magou had named me Mohammed, a name I shed, my first visit to Agmamine. I never told her that I left her name when I left the place.

Chicken squabbles set a rhythm that melted me into the stiff metka where I rested in anonymity between its stacked bamboo poles. I obeyed what Magou commanded—to think and to do nothing—without guilt because that was expected of me.

Mini sneaked back a few minutes later. She was more confident than the last time I'd visited. She carried a little money pouch that she offered to me. It held pieces of karo, the russet shell of a doum palm seed that children ate as candy. I broke off a small piece. It tasted like bitter molasses and chewed like particle board, but I smiled approvingly. Magou handed her a glass of tea to deliver to Momiis, Magou's eldest grandchild. While Mini waited for Momiis to finish, she started singing and twirling in her pink dress over the sand until her legs tangled and she fell, sprawled on the sand. Magou and I laughed as she stalked goats around the compound, and disappeared behind Caleb's old house. When she returned, black smears outlined her mouth. *Mini, come here. Have you been eating charcoal again?* Magou asked sternly. *Uh, you are a problem! All you do is fight and eat charcoal and dirt.* Mini tucked one hand behind her dress and pulled on her bottom lip with the other. She looked happier than I'd ever seen her.

In the dusky dark Ahmed Taleb held my hand and guided me to Brahime's house on top of the dune. Brahime appeared from a distance to be a petrified tree. He intimidated me more than any other Mauritanian, but we'd bonded through taunting. He was raking the dirt in front of his house. *So, you're actually working,* I said when I thought he could hear me. He looked up from his raking and grinned. *Hey, what are you doing here?* I explained that I was leaving and wanted to say goodbye since I hadn't seen him in the market. *Yeah, I didn't go to town today. I was repairing my house. After last night's sandstorm, I thought it might rain, so I wanted to fix it before the rainy season starts.* He motioned me to his cot next to his wife and new baby. He introduced me to his new son, Alioune, and told me he would name his next son, Jeremy. The

sentiment was touching, but I doubted his seriousness. Ahmed Taleb fell asleep at the end of the cot, and Brahime started raking again as we talked. I noticed a cow behind him spying on our conversation. It had gris gris strung between its horns, resting near its eye like an eye patch. A pirate cow. Usually children wore gris gris blessed by priests for protection, but I'd never seen one on an animal. Brahime laughed, *That one's dumb. I put the gris gris on her to protect her from herself.* I smiled. *Like her owner you mean?* He chuckled. *Jeremy, gsar umr-ak!* I knew we were friends when he asked God to shorten your life with a smile. At full dark, I woke Ahmed Taleb, and we returned for dinner.

In the morning we ate porridge quietly. Ahmed Taleb sat close to me. Magou was rummaging through her room. *She's going to make me take something from her,* I thought. *Momiis, where did I put that pretty . . .* her voice floated from the room. I dreaded this part of the visit. She never understood that I simply enjoyed the family. I didn't want any more from her. She emerged from the room without having found what she'd hoped. She sat down next to me and removed a black, stone bracelet from her arm. *Here, I want you to take this.* I protested, but she insisted, *You're leaving! You must have something to remember us by.* A truck engine ended my complaints. *Quick Mohammed, get your stuff. This is your truck!* I hurried into the house for my backpack, and when I emerged from the doorway, Mini was waiting. She grabbed my shirt and bent her neck to the sky to stare into my eyes. *Mohammed?* Her voice curled up at the *d*. She knew what was about to happen. Only three, she was being abandoned for a second time. She walked me to the truck. Ahmed Taleb turned away as we passed. He never said goodbye. The truck interrupted us again as I left with it.

My vision receded from where my body was taking me as I walked from the truck. Metal hinges shrilled throughout the market. I navigated the serpentine alleys from somewhere else. People did their people things. I walked hoping never to get there. I feared that I would hate them all. Goats leapt from the walls of a ruined mud house. I didn't want to hate anyone. I had no choice. They would ruin everything for me. The goodbye when I never wanted to go. Moussa's fence ticked past me. I loved Moussa so much. The fence ended. I hated the donkey. I watched my feet step, step, step. *It's alright*, I thought. *I was probably wrong. A donkey wouldn't explode. Its ribcage is bone. We can move it this afternoon. It will be easy. I'll just rent a truck. My neighbors won't hate me. I'm leaving soon, and I'll forget the whole thing.* Tire tracks had replaced the urine stains. I unlocked my door, sat in my chair, and turned on my radio. Hamas and Fatah were still fighting. I returned to the morning's memories and the welcome pain of longing.